



# On His Bride's Terms

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** He's never lost...

But can his bride be won?

CEO Primo Holt needs a wife who can give him an heir to his empire. He's found the perfect woman—heiress Faye MacKenzie. Only, despite their searing attraction, she's playing hard to get! Before she agrees to Primo's convenient proposal, Faye has terms of her own...

Faye is happy to make a deal that secures her family's failing business. She just won't commit to more than one year of wedded bliss. Because no matter how insatiable her hunger for him, she can never give Primo everything he wants from their marriage...

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## PROLOGUE

SHE WASN'T THE most striking woman in the room, but that was largely because she was dressed with understated elegance and not to draw attention, unlike most of the women here. But, nevertheless, there was something very compelling about her. He saw how she drew second glances. Third.

She was undoubtedly a beauty, but Primo Holt had to concede he was judging her from a distance. He'd never met Faye MacKenzie, or seen her up close, in spite of the fact that their worlds intersected on a regular basis.

But very soon they would interact on a much more personal level because he had every intention of asking her to marry him.

He'd known he would have to marry sooner or later—as the scion of one of North America's most notable families, it was a duty he couldn't escape—but he'd managed to put it off for a long time. However, lately he'd had to acknowledge that sooner or later was now.

Not marrying was generating headlines and speculation about his personal life that he did not need. It was detracting from the business. And once his personal life began to affect the bottom line, it was time to face reality.

Faye MacKenzie was the perfect candidate, whittled down from a list carefully curated by his closest advisors. She came from an impeccable family line, dating back into American history almost as far as Primo's. People said his kin had come in on the Mayflower. He knew that was just a myth, but they weren't far off the mark.

Her Scottish/English ancestry was evident not only in her name but also her colouring. Pale skin—a rarity in these circles of golden skin that spoke of regular holidays in various exotic climes. Black hair, flowing in silken waves over her bare shoulders. She wore a classic strapless black dress, moulding to her slim curves with a deceptive simplicity that could only have come from one of the world's top designers. Discreet jewellery, but impressive nonetheless and no doubt from the family vault.

She was a divorcée, but Primo didn't care about that. She'd married young and divorced young. No children. Apart from that there was no hint of impropriety. She was thirty, to his thirty-five. She was experienced. Mature. Also, appealingly, she was independent. She had a job. She was a highly respected private art broker. She had a degree in art history and a Master's specialising in art business.

He had no time for taking on a wife who would be intimidated by him, or unused to his world. He needed to hit the ground running with this marriage—and, crucially, he knew just how to appeal to Faye MacKenzie to entice her to agree.

## CHAPTER ONE

'HOWISYOURdear father? It's been a while since we've seen him, and one hears things...'

Faye MacKenzie forced a bright smile in the face of this man and his cronies who had surrounded her before she could escape. She knew well that the solicitous question and their veneer of concern was just that—a very thin veneer—and that underneath it was a desire for any kind of hint that all was not well, and that her father was on the way out—of life and off the board of MacKenzie Enterprises, upon which he'd sat since his own father had died some forty years before.

'Gentlemen, I will pass on your regards. My father is just fine—never better, in fact.

And as for what you've heard... You'll have to forgive my ignorance, because I am not privy to such things. And now, if you'll excuse me, there's someone I need to catch before they leave.'

Faye slipped through a gap in the circle of vultures around her and her smile faded, to be replaced by pursed lips and a set jaw. She snagged a full glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and ducked behind an exuberant plant on the edge of the ballroom, so she could take a break and absorb the fact that all was not well, and coming to this function in the centre of Manhattan this evening had proved her and her father's suspicions right. People were talking.

She took a gulp of sparkling wine, hoping it might soothe her frayed nerves. A breeze skated over her skin and she looked behind her to see open doors leading out onto a terrace. Air... Air would be good.

She went outside and stood at the wall and tipped her head back for a moment, closing her eyes. The sounds behind her from the packed ballroom—people chatting, laughing, gossiping against the backdrop of classical music—fell away, to be replaced with the sounds of the city far below. A siren, a car horn.

Whenever she was home now, and not travelling for work, she spent most of her time with her father in their upstate family home in Westchester, so she usually enjoyed coming into the city as a diversion. But this evening the sounds of the city weren't soothing. They were jarring. Because she knew she would have to go home and confirm her father's worst fears.

She dropped her head back again, opened her eyes and looked out over the view of Manhattan's glittering skyline unseeingly. Frustration mixed with anxiety churned in her gut again. Why had he been so foolish as to—?

'Not enjoying the party? I can't say I blame you.'

Faye went very still. A bizarre thought struck her—the fact that she knew exactly who had just spoken, even though she'd never met him face to face, close up. She'd seen him across the room earlier—it would have been hard to miss him, head and shoulders above everyone else, making her pulse trip with dismaying ease. Dismaying because it was such a cliché to be affected by one of the richest and most gorgeous men in the world as easily as if she was an innocent debutante.

She was no innocent debutante.

She took a breath and turned to the man who was standing beside her, looking at her. She had to tip her head back because he was well over a foot taller than her. And she wasn't that small. He was far taller and broader up close, and it made her skin feel hot. He was solid. All muscle and bone.

He held out a hand. 'Primo Holt. I don't believe we've actually ever met?'

Faye might have laughed out loud. Anyone who didn't know who this man was most likely didn't have a pulse. But shock kept her from breaking into laughter. She almost wanted to look around them, to see if there was a camera crew capturing her reaction for some kind of a prank show. She might inhabit the same world as Primo Holt, but she was a lot further down the food chain.

She put out her own hand, but just before they made physical contact she had a strange sense that her life was going to be changed for ever the moment they touched. She didn't have time to pooh-pooh the audacious thought before he was clasping her hand in his, and a powerful surge of electricity ignited her blood and made her skin prickle into goosebumps.

Faye couldn't help the intake of shocked breath. She saw how his eyes widened a little, as if he too had felt it. They were beautiful eyes. Blue. Piercing and direct. They stood out against the tan of his skin and the stunning architecture of his face. Thick

dark golden hair swept back from a broad brow. He really was ridiculously gorgeous—as if the gods had decided to bestow upon this man even more than his birthright of incredible wealth and fortune.

And yet any sense of beauty was diluted by a hard jaw and the sheer power field around him that was almost tangible. He was ridiculously masculine, in a world where most men were soft from privilege.

She struggled to make her brain function and somehow managed to say, ‘I’m Faye MacKenzie.’

His hand squeezed hers minutely before letting her go. ‘Yes, I know who you are.’

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Faye instinctively brought her hand back into her chest, almost cradling it, as if to keep the sense of his hand holding hers for as long as possible. Dimly she wondered what on earth was wrong with her. She was behaving like a star-struck groupie.

She blinked and dropped her hand to her side. He was still there, but she felt marginally more in control of her reaction.

‘How can I help you?’

He frowned a little and his mouth tipped up, which only brought Faye’s attention there. Her belly did a swooping somersault. Mother. Of. God. The man’s mouth was pure sin. Sculpted and full and firm. And he was laughing at her. Teeth straight and white. He was quite literally an angel in human form. But he wasn’t a benign angel... She sensed that he could very much cause havoc.

Faye dragged her gaze back up. She bristled at the way he was affecting her so easily, making her take leave of her sanity and senses, and she seized it—anything to feel less unmoored by this man’s presence.

‘Is that amusing?’

His mouth straightened, but there was still a glint in his eye. ‘No, not at all, but actually there is something you can help me with.’

‘I find that a little unbelievable.’

Primo leaned against the wall beside Faye, supremely nonchalant. To be under this

man's laser-like gaze was beyond disconcerting. She felt very conscious of the fact that she wasn't half as glittering as other women at the party. She wished she'd put on more make-up.

'And why would that be?' he asked. 'Aren't you one of the world's foremost art experts?'

Her insides jolted. He knew what she did? She couldn't help a small frisson of pleasure from the compliment. 'I wouldn't know about that, but it is my sphere of interest, yes.'

'I've looked you up. You have an impressive list of satisfied clients and have brokered some of the biggest deals in the last decade.'

Now Faye felt embarrassed, and she ducked her head slightly. 'It's something I'm passionate about, which makes it easy to do it for a living.'

'Passion certainly makes things more interesting, no?'

Faye looked at him. Was he...flirting with her? The expression on his face was inscrutable, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. An incendiary image of her and this man with naked limbs entwined flashed into her head before she could stop it. It left her even more disconcerted and breathless. Men didn't have this kind of viscerally physical effect on her.

Clearly oblivious to her wayward imagination, Primo glanced behind them at the party and then back to her. 'What would you say if I asked if you'd like to come for a drink with me?'

Faye's heart thumped and she felt momentarily dizzy. Was Primo Holt, one of the world's most eligible bachelors, really asking her out for a drink?



‘Not here,’ he added. ‘Somewhere close. I’d like to get your professional opinion on something.’

The dizziness subsided. It wasn’t a date. It was work-related. It wasn’t his fault that his every utterance sounded like something far more decadent and illicit. But a small rogue part of her pointed out that if it was entirely professional he’d have asked if she would meet him at his office, or during work hours. Not late at night. For a drink.

But maybe this was how he conducted business. How would she know? The man was famously discreet in his business and personal life. He’d never been linked with a woman long enough to cause speculation to mount, and the women he did get pictured with all seemed to be as discreet as him.

He was looking at her, waiting for an answer. Even though he’d said he wanted to discuss something, a giddy excitement gripped her. It scared her. Faye got asked out on dates. She even went on some. She even spent the night in some men’s beds. But rarely—and not for a long while.

‘You want to go for a drink to discuss something?’ It was as if she had to have it confirmed.

He nodded. ‘That is unless you need to stay at the party. We could arrange another time?’

Faye couldn’t see over Primo’s shoulder, but she didn’t need to to know what was behind him. More vultures circling to ask her about her father. And there was something else. An urge to seize this moment. Because she was intrigued and more than a little intoxicated by his interest. Even if it did turn out to be purely professional.

She racked her brains for when she might have heard anyone in the art world discuss

working with him, but drew a blank. If Primo Holt wanted to work with her then it would be a massive feather in her cap. His family had an extensive private art collection that not many had ever seen. If she could persuade him to open it up, loan some works to galleries, it would be a massive coup.

So when she said, 'No, I'm happy to leave now,' she told herself that it was purely out of curiosity and for the potential professional connection. Not because he was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen up close.

Primo was already taking a phone out of his pocket saying, 'Good, I'll instruct my driver to be ready. Meet you in the lobby in ten minutes? I just have to say goodbye to the host.'

Of course he did. Because he was Primo Holt and he was automatically a guest of honour. Unlike Faye, who the host would know of, but wouldn't care less about if she ducked out early. With Primo Holt.

She must have nodded her assent, or said something, because she watched him walk back towards the party with a long-legged stride. Back broad. Classic tuxedo moulding to his body like a second skin. Long legs. Narrow waist.

She saw how the crowd parted to admit him, and then closed behind him again like a sea of adoring acolytes. She could see people looking at her, whispering, and suddenly she wanted to escape.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

She made her way to the cloakroom and got the jacket that matched her dress—loose cape-style, with sleeves—and slipped it on. When she got to the lobby she didn't have time to worry if Primo Holt might have changed his mind or come to his senses, because he was already waiting for her, wearing a long overcoat. He was intimidatingly suave.

He saw her and watched her walk towards him. Faye prayed she wouldn't fall flat on her face and somehow managed not to. Primo put out a hand for her to precede him and she went out and down the steps, to be guided into the back of a sleek SUV with tinted windows.

It was early spring, and the air still had a nip, but she knew that wasn't why her skin prickled. It was the man sliding into the back alongside her now, issuing instructions to the driver, who nodded, and then they were moving out smoothly into the night-time Manhattan traffic.

Faye was still too stunned to say anything, not really believing she was in the back of Primo Holt's car being driven across town.

'There's a private club where we can have a drink without being bothered, is that okay?'

Faye turned to look at the man who seemed so huge on the other side of the car. His scent was crisp and unmistakably masculine. She nodded. 'That sounds fine.'

Before long they were pulling to a stop outside a discreet building. She found that she liked the fact that he hadn't tried to make superficial conversation to fill the time en

route. She rarely met people who could sit in silence with such ease.

The driver opened her door and she got out. Once again Primo put out a hand to let her precede him to a doorway under an awning that opened as if by magic as she approached. She heard Primo address the suited man in the doorway in fluent French.

Then he said, ‘Marcel, I’d like you to meet Faye MacKenzie. I think we’ll just be having drinks—unless you’re hungry?’

Faye shook her head. The thought of trying to eat in this man’s company made her stomach flip-flop. ‘No, just drinks is fine.’

Their coats were taken. Faye guessed this was a private members’ club and maybe a guesthouse. It was sumptuously decorated with soft carpets, muted colours, hand-painted wallpaper, and luxurious drapes that were pulled back at the entrance to the bar. It had dimly lit booths and tables, around which sat at least a couple of A-listers whom Faye recognised.

They were directed to a booth near the far end of the bar, tucked away but with a view of the room. Faye sat down and Primo slid in from the other side.

Low music accompanied the murmur of chatter and laughter. It was decadent and ultra luxe. Discreet glamour. No wonder Primo Holt’s personal life was a well-kept mystery if this is where he conducted his liaisons.

Faye’s face grew warm under the soft lights. Who said this was a liaison? And since when was she so hungry for male attention? She’d been burned a long time ago with her first—and only—marriage, and she’d carved out a life for herself in which her independence was the most prized thing.

She hadn’t felt the need to follow a man in such a long time that it was only now she

was realising she hadn't even hesitated to acquiesce to his invitation. As if her brain had decamped and allowed her body to dictate her actions. She could tell herself it was purely professional curiosity, but she knew that wasn't true.

A waiter approached the table. Primo looked at Faye. 'What would you like?'

She said, 'A classic gin martini—and some water, please.'

She hadn't drunk much at all this evening, but this situation was too surreal. She felt she needed the alcohol, but at the same time wanted to maintain a clear head.

He ordered a whisky.

When the waiter left Faye forced herself to look at Primo Holt, even if it did feel like looking directly into sunlight. Her mind blanked and that was unnerving, because it wasn't as if she wasn't used to talking to VIPs.

As if hearing her thoughts he said, 'I read about the deal you just negotiated for a Picasso for a client rumoured to be part of the British Royal Family.'

Faye couldn't help but feel a little glow of pride. It had been a monumental deal. She inclined her head and said, 'I can confirm it was a Picasso, but as for who my client was... I couldn't possibly comment.'

'Someone who knows how to be discreet? I like that.'

Faye felt more than a frisson this time. She had a sense that he wasn't just talking about professional discretion. Right now, Primo Holt was managing to eclipse even royalty.

His hand went to his bow-tie and he made a small face as he said, 'Do you mind?'

These infernal things always make me feel like I'm being strangled.'

Faye shook her head and watched wordlessly as long fingers undid his tie and he opened a top button, revealing the strong, bronzed column of his throat. It jogged her memory. Hadn't his mother been a Brazilian supermodel?

He lifted his glass and said, 'Cheers.'

Faye looked around. Her drink was on the table on an embossed coaster. She hadn't even noticed the waiter's return. Too busy ogling Primo Holt.

She lifted her glass and let it touch his. She echoed his cheers, then took a sip, relishing the slight burn of the alcohol. It gave her the courage to say, 'I'm surprised you didn't have a date with you.'

He put his own glass down and shook his head. 'I was there alone. I'm not seeing anyone at the moment. Are you?'

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

The bluntness of his question took her by surprise. But she found she liked it. She shook her head. 'No, I'm not with anyone right now.'

Hadn't been for ages. But he didn't need to know that. She struggled to remember the last time he'd been linked with someone. He always seemed to choose women who were intimidatingly beautiful and accomplished. Something Faye had obviously absorbed subliminally over the years.

'It's strange that we've never met face to face before,' he noted. 'When we've been present at many of the same events over the years.'

Faye bit back a wry smile. 'That might be the case, but I don't think we're quite on the same...level.'

'Your family name is about as old as mine.'

Faye shrugged. 'Nevertheless, MacKenzie Enterprises is a minnow compared to Holt Industries.'

'Smaller, maybe, but no less successful in its own right. How is your father, by the way? I've always had a lot of respect for him. He's straight-talking.'

Faye pushed aside her niggling anxieties. 'He's fine. Slower now, but no less able.'

Her father had been involved in a car accident some years previously and had damaged his legs, so he was now confined to a wheelchair, or walking frame.

‘It’s just you and him?’

Faye nodded, wondering where this was going. ‘Yes. I’m an only child, and my mother passed away when I was still a teenager.’

‘I’m sorry...you were young to lose her.’

Faye shrugged minutely. ‘My father and I had each other.’

‘He never remarried?’

Faye shook her head. ‘No, he adored her. They were an urban legend...a love-match.’

‘You were lucky to have that. My parents were most definitely not a love-match, and my father has never been the paternal type.’

‘They divorced, didn’t they?’

Primo nodded. ‘When I was much younger. Our mother walked out the door one day and never came back. I’ve only seen her sporadically since then.’

Faye sucked in a breath at the easy way he’d revealed an undoubtedly traumatic incident in his life. ‘That’s tough.’

Primo seemed unconcerned. ‘It was a long time ago. I don’t like to dwell on the past. It holds us back.’

Faye took the hint.

Move on.



Emboldened by this frank exchange, she said, 'I read that you have full control of your family business now.'

'My father never really did care about the legacy. He just did his job and retired as soon as he could.' Primo's mouth twisted a little. 'No problem with succession in our family.'

Faye frowned. 'Don't you have a brother?' She vaguely recalled something about him walking away from the family business some years ago.

'Yes, Quintano. But he's never been interested in the family business—and he became even less so when he found out our father wasn't his father.'

Faye had heard about this, but had never been sure how true it was. 'He doesn't live here, does he?'

'No, he lives in Brazil with his wife and his son. And they had twin girls a few months ago.'

Faye felt a familiar clutch of pain down low in her abdomen. A mixture of emotion and the memory of the pain she'd suffered. 'Do you see them much?'

A shadow crossed Primo's face. The first time this evening she'd seen it.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He lifted his glass and said, 'No.' He took a sip of his drink.

Faye felt a little light-headed. They were discussing subjects that seemed awfully personal for a first conversation between relative strangers.

Afraid that she was getting lost in a little fantasy that this was a date, she said, 'It's very nice that you asked me here for a drink...but you mentioned needing my opinion on something?'

To her surprise, Primo suddenly looked a little abashed—if such a man could look abashed.

He said, 'I have to admit that while I would be interested in your professional opinion, it's not the primary reason I asked you here, which is for something along more personal lines.'

There was no mistaking the gleam of interest in his eyes now. There was a slow thump of Faye's heart. 'Oh?' She couldn't help asking. 'I'm a little curious...why me?'

Why not one of the vastly younger and more beautiful women who had been at that function, simpering and pouting and looking for their next rich and powerful boyfriend?

Primo looked at her. 'You're a very beautiful woman.'

Faye didn't like how those words made her insides fizz and jump like a young girl's.

She was too old for these games, and her impression of Primo so far was that he wasn't a game-player.

Her gaze narrowed. 'Thank you for the compliment, but we both know you could be sitting here with someone far more wide-eyed than me.'

Primo felt a surge of adrenalin go through him. This was why he wanted to marry Faye MacKenzie—precisely because she wasn't some wide-eyed ingenue. And she was extraordinarily beautiful. Far more than he'd given her credit for. No wonder she'd been drawing looks at the party.

Her eyes were huge, and the most unusual shade of hazel, turning from gold to brown to green within a second. Finely drawn dark brows. Exquisite bone structure. But it was her mouth that had captivated Primo the minute he'd seen her up close. It was full. Lush. At odds with such a refined face. Hinting at a level of sensuality that was backed up by a refreshing earthiness he didn't usually encounter in women from this milieu.

He shook his head slowly and said, 'On the contrary, I knew I wanted to ask you for a drink before I introduced myself.'

He saw how she tensed slightly, drew back. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that I already knew I wanted to talk to you. To meet you.'

Primo knew instinctively that the only way to play it with this woman was to put his cards on the table. She wouldn't appreciate games.

'It's quite simple. I would like you to consider marrying me.'

Those stunning eyes widened and Primo noticed how long her lashes were. She was

shocked. Colour left her cheeks.

She said a little faintly, 'Did I just hear you say...?' She trailed off.

'That I would like you to consider a marriage proposal? Yes, you did.'

She was visibly tense now. Primo had to curb a strange urge to touch her, as if to comfort her in some way. Reassure her.

She shook her head slowly, as if trying to clear it of something, and then she said, 'That's the most preposterous thing I've ever heard. We don't even know each other.'

'Hence the reason why I wanted to meet you. To ascertain what I already suspected: that you and I have the potential to make a great match.'

The fact that his blood was humming with electricity and awareness only added to the sense of rightness. He wanted her. As he hadn't wanted a woman in a long time. The soft golden lights turned her dark hair and pale skin lustrous. From a distance earlier, the elegantly simple dress had only hinted at the body underneath, but up close she was all woman, with tantalising curves.

But as he watched her he could see the shock fade and her jaw tighten. She said, 'Thank you for the drink, Mr Holt, but if you've had your fun, I'm going to leave now.'

She turned away and started to move out of the booth. It took a second for Primo to realise she was really leaving. He was so unused to anyone walking away from him.

Something unfamiliar made his gut lurch. Was it...panic?

He cursed himself. He had misread this situation badly. He was usually a lot more

suave than this.

Before he knew what he was doing, he'd put his hand on her arm and was saying, 'Stop, please... I'm not making fun of you. This isn't a joke.'

## CHAPTER TWO

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

THEFOLLOWINGDAY, Faye paced up and down in the reception room at the family home. She hadn't slept a wink. Her head was full of questions and revelations and sheer...shock. Still.

Primo Holt had asked her for a drink under false pretences.

Her anger and humiliation still burned bright.

He wanted to marry her.

Faye stopped pacing as she recalled how he'd tried to persuade her to stay at the bar, but she'd insisted on leaving.

He'd said to her before she'd left, 'I may have made an error in being so upfront, but after meeting you I thought you'd appreciate this approach more.'

More than what? Faye had asked herself as she'd made her way back to the family home in Westchester. He'd insisted on his driver taking her. In the end she'd accepted that offer, feeling that after inviting her out to have a joke at her expense it was the least he could do.

But it had been no joke.

He'd been deadly serious, because he'd had an agenda all along, while she'd been staring lustfully at his mouth. The memory made her burn. And she hadn't even known the full extent of his agenda until this morning, when he'd arrived at the house to have a meeting with her father.

Aprearrangedmeeting.

The sense of exposure made her insides curdle. She'd believed that Primo Holt had fancied her, and that that was why he'd asked her for a drink. It had been a total charade. He'd just wanted to see her up close before going into a meeting with her father, and she knew exactly what that would be about. Because, as those men last night had alluded to, her father was in a weak position and Primo Holt was making his real intentions very clear.

To take over MacKenzie Enterprises.

Faye cursed herself. How could she have been so blind? So naive? God knew, she more than most women knew what this world was like and how everyone in it was a commodity. She'd learned that lesson after her first marriage, because as soon as she'd become a worthless commodity her husband had cut her loose. Less than a year into their marriage.

She veered away from that particular memory, focusing her ire on Primo Holt again. She'd been distracted by a hard body and a pretty—no—a spectacular face. Proving that in spite of everything she really was as weak and susceptible as any blushing debutante.

At least he didn't woo you, pointed out a little voice.

Faye shuddered delicately. There was that, at least. He hadn't drawn out the charade. That would have been worse. At least she'd only been under the illusion that he fancied her for about an hour, and not for weeks. She would have exposed herself even more.

Because the truth was that she'd found him far too exciting and thrilling, and if he'd tried to do something like kiss her—Her face burned at the knowledge that she would

have let him.

He'd awoken a dormant fire inside her. A fire she'd buried ever since she'd been so badly burned by her marriage. A fire that she wasn't entirely sure she'd ever felt before. Not even with her husband.

There was a light knock on the door and Faye tensed. 'Come in.'

Mary, their housekeeper, appeared in the doorway. 'Mr Holt has finished his meeting with your father. He'd like to see you before he leaves.'

I bet he would.

Faye felt like petulantly refusing to see him, but she knew she couldn't. This was so much bigger now than their mortifying non-date last night.

'Of course. Please show him in.'

Mary stood back, and Faye could see the way the older woman's eyes widened as she admitted the tall, powerful form of Primo Holt. He was wearing a steel-grey three-piece suit. Hair brushed back from his forehead. He looked as if he'd stepped out of a photoshoot for male models—except he was no male model. He was too big...too imposing. She realised then that in spite of his veneer of civility there was something wild about him. Untamed. It excited her.

He walked in and Faye crossed her arms over her chest. When she'd found out that he was due to visit her father that day she'd dressed carefully in tailored trousers and a silk shirt, buttoned up. Hair pulled back into a bun. The thought of giving him any kind of impression that she fancied him made her cringe.

That sense of exposure made her say now, 'Why the great charade last night? Why



didn't you tell me you already had a meeting planned with my father?'

He shook his head. 'It wasn't a charade. I did want to meet you face to face.'

She arched a brow. 'And what? Do a bit of tyre-kicking before you pursued your real agenda? Which I presume is to take advantage of my father's current situation?' Before he could answer, she said, 'You're no better than those other vultures who were there last night, feigning concern for his welfare. You're more devious.'

He winced. 'I guess I deserved that.' His expression cleared. 'I meant what I said, though. I respect your father and I respect the business your family have built up. The truth is that, yes, I had a plan to meet with your father, but it just so happens that I'm also in need of a wife. I hadn't specifically planned on meeting you before talking with your father, but when I found out you'd been invited to that party last night it was too good an opportunity to pass up.'

This only made Faye's sense of humiliation more intense—especially when she remembered her reaction to him. 'And what, pray tell, were you going to do if you decided after meeting me that I was not someone you cared to propose to?'

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He made a minute movement with one broad shoulder. 'I would have still spoken to your father, but I would have been pursuing a wife elsewhere.'

Faye smiled tightly. 'How convenient for you that you deemed me suitable after...what...?' She lifted her wrist and pretended to look at a watch, then looked back to him. 'About an hour? How could you have been so sure you want me as a wife?'

A muscle in his jaw ticked. Faye didn't care.

And then, before he could speak, something struck her and she felt slightly nauseous. 'You had me investigated, didn't you?'

She turned away and started to pace, her mind spinning with recrimination. Of course! How could I be so stupid?

She turned to face Primo again, folding her arms across her chest again. 'No one in our world acts spontaneously. Tell me, where was I on the list?'

That muscle ticked again, but he had the grace not to feign ignorance. 'You were top. Because of your association with your father.'

'Lucky me,' Faye said caustically. 'And lucky you to have had such a quick search. Pity, though, that it's come to nothing.'

'I wouldn't be so quick to reject a perfectly good offer.'

Faye's jaw dropped. When she could manage it, she said, 'You are unbelievably arrogant.'

'Yes,' he agreed easily, 'I am arrogant. But I think you'll find it's born out of knowing I work hard. I'm very good at what I do and it's not out of a sense of entitlement.'

His easy acceptance of what she'd just accused him of took the wind out of her sails a little. She couldn't imagine many people accusing Primo Holt of arrogance. And getting away with it.

She hated to admit it, but he intrigued her—and he was right. He'd always had a reputation for working as hard as his employees, not expecting them to do anything he wouldn't, and as Holt Industries encompassed everything from real estate to media corporations, that was some feat.

'So, you're hoping for some kind of value package deal? Is that it? Bag a wife and take over MacKenzie Enterprises at the same time?'

He put his hands in his pockets, and that made Faye want to look down. But she resisted the urge. He rocked back on his heels. Supremely at ease, in spite of the crackling undercurrents. Maybe she was the only one who could feel them?

'You have to admit that it would be a convenient solution all round,' he said.

Faye scoffed. 'Convenient for you, you mean.'

Primo suddenly looked serious. 'Do you realise how weakened your father is right now? The board could force him out within weeks if he continues as he is. He should never have taken the advice to sell off so many shares.'

Faye felt sick again. Primo spoke the stark truth. She'd said as much to her father herself. He'd given in to the lure of handing over a little more control, and at the urging of a bad advisor he'd let go of more than he'd intended.

Faye couldn't help sounding a little bitter. 'I suppose you'd like us to believe you have only our best interests at heart?'

'I won't lie and tell you that, no. Right now, you and your father have no personal relevance for me. But I do have the company's best interests at heart because it's a good business opportunity.'

You have no personal relevance for me.

Those words struck at Faye in a place they shouldn't be striking. This man was a stranger.

'Am I to read between the lines and surmise that if we were married we would have more "personal relevance"? Which would then translate into a sense of responsibility to our family legacy?'

Primo's eyes flashed. A ghost of a smile made one corner of his mouth quirk. 'That would be one way of looking at it, yes.'

Faye's eyes went wide. He was making those vultures from last night look like bunny rabbits. 'I don't think I've ever met someone so cynical and arrogant and downright—'

Primo held up a hand. 'Please, save your breath. I know exactly what I am.'

Faye closed her mouth. She'd always considered herself a pretty level person, but this man managed to get her worked up in a way that no one else ever had. He made her

feel defensive, exposed, and full of hot, volatile things.

Fighting to regain some semblance of control in the face of Primo Holt's nonchalance, Faye asked, 'Why do you think it's such a good business opportunity?'

He answered without missing a beat. 'You're a legacy brand that's been a cornerstone of supplying and managing the construction industry since the eighteen-hundreds. That's the kind of name and reputation money can't buy. By letting me take majority control, your father can be assured of its survival for another couple of generations, hopefully. And, yes, it will add to the Holt Industries portfolio. Anyone else will likely not have the same respect for your father or the name.'

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He went on.

‘I won’t lie. We would restructure—we’d have to. The reason your father came so close to handing over his majority share was because you’re haemorrhaging liquidity. This way your father would get to see out the business he’s cultivated his whole life and can ensure it lasts on into the future.’

‘Positively altruistic,’ Faye commented dryly.

Primo shook his head. ‘Not at all. I fully expect it to become a thriving profitable company again, but if it doesn’t I will carve it up and parcel it off without hesitation.’ He smiled, and it was a shark’s smile. ‘However, I have every confidence it won’t come to that. Your father’s company has just diversified too much. It needs to focus on what it was always known for before, as an iron and steel foundry.’

Once again a little jolt of recognition went through Faye. That was what she’d been saying to her father for years. But he’d always tell her that she couldn’t possibly understand the intricacies of a billion-dollar business. He’d never resented her for being an only child and a girl, and not being interested in taking her place on the board, but she knew he’d been disappointed the business would essentially die out with him.

But maybe now...it wouldn’t.

As if hearing her thoughts, Primo added, ‘Your father isn’t going to live for ever, Faye. By doing this deal with me, he’ll protect the MacKenzie name and reputation after he’s gone.’

Faye's insides twisted. She knew her father was getting old. And tired. His weariness was what had led to his making a bad decision to trust someone else's advice.

But this was only part of the reason Primo Holt was here.

'And that, I presume, is contingent on our marriage?'

'I'm not saying the marriage is a prerequisite for the business deal...but, as I've pointed out, it would ensure a certain level of loyalty and security and commitment to a long-term investment that can't be bought or negotiated.'

Faye pretended to sniff the air. 'Maybe I'm going a little crazy, but I could swear there's a smell of...of blackmail in the air, with base notes of cynicism.'

Primo let out a bark of laughter. 'Hardly! I'd call it...an incentive.'

He looked at her, eyes twinkling. She was amusing him.

He said, 'I don't know how you can be born into our world and not be cynical. At least then one isn't at the mercy of delusion and disappointment. I wouldn't be offering to marry you if I didn't feel like we'd make a good couple, Faye. Two of America's foremost families forming a union, both personally and professionally, would be considered quite a sweet incentive by most.'

Sweet. A little shiver went through Faye. Nothing about this man said sweet. He conjured up words like hard...ruthless. Not sweet.

She looked at him, more curious than she'd like to admit considering the subject of this conversation. 'And what do you get out of the marriage?'

'Reputational stability. I'm thirty-five. My single status has been having an adverse

effect on some of my deals lately. I'm not considered trustworthy. It's old-fashioned, and a bit archaic, but it's there. And I want to marry someone who is my equal, not some debutante.'

Faye wasn't sure if she should feel flattered or not. But she had to admit that she liked it that he wasn't one of those men who seemed to think it would make him look more virile to marry a woman a decade younger.

'Why haven't you married before now?'

He answered without hesitation. 'It's not an institution I have any interest in. I have no delusions about love, or romance. I saw only toxicity in my parents' marriage, and I've never had any desire to risk repeating that. However, I have always known that one day I would have to marry, and the longer I remain single, the more speculation about my personal life is eclipsing the business—and that's not acceptable.'

He continued.

'As much as I see it as a necessary evil, I do think that with the right kind of wife one's standing, socially and professionally, can be enhanced, and that's what I'd be hoping for.'

Wow, that's cold.

Faye hadn't expected such a brutally clinical answer, but at least he wasn't pretending that it would be anything but a marriage of convenience.

She said, 'As I'm sure your team informed you when collating their dossier on my suitability, I was married and I am now divorced. I don't particularly want to repeat the experience.'



‘It wasn’t good?’

No. She’d believed herself in love with her husband, and he with her, but she’d been wrong. Getting divorced within a year of her wedding day had been humiliating and hurtful.

Faye lifted her chin. ‘Not particularly, no. Hence my lack of desire to jump into another marriage.’

‘This would be different.’

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

‘How?’

‘As you said, you’re no wide-eyed ingenue. Neither am I. We’d be going into this with the understanding that it is an agreement made between two adults who can see the benefits of such a union. No emotional artifice.’

Faye felt a little breathless all of a sudden. No, there was no emotional artifice, and he wasn’t wide-eyed. He was worldly-wise and experienced.

Once again she had a disconcerting flash of his head coming closer to hers...how he might take her face in his hands, angling it up towards him so he could kiss her so deeply that—

‘You must be fielding curiosity about your personal life too,’ he noted.

Faye smiled thinly. ‘At the age of thirty, I think most people consider me irrelevant.’

Primo’s gaze dropped over her body and then moved back up again, so thoroughly and slowly that it was bordering on insolent. When his eyes met hers again he said, very clearly, ‘You are most definitely not irrelevant.’

Faye hated how that affected her. Because she had no doubt that he turned this easy charm on everyone, bending them to his will.

Deep down, she had been feeling an increasing sense of becoming invisible. Of resigning herself to the fact that she might be alone for the rest of her life. Too independent for some men, too intelligent for others. Too burned by her marriage to

let anyone get too close. Too afraid of exposing herself like that again in a world where love-matches didn't really exist.

She'd somehow forgotten that when she'd met her husband, and had thought that maybe she'd buck the trend, like her parents had, and would have a real marriage.

But it had become clear pretty quickly—at the first bump in the road—that their marriage hadn't been founded on much at all. A lesson Faye hadn't forgotten and wouldn't ever forget.

So in some ways, much as it galled her to admit it, what Primo was proposing wasn't altogether unappealing. Faye knew her father worried about her. He was an old conservative romantic, and she knew that he would be happier if she were married. She would do anything to make her father happy. But this...?

Then she thought of something Primo hadn't mentioned and her insides twisted. She knew how to put him off the idea of marrying her.

'What about children? I presume they're a part of your long-term plan? You have responsibilities to your own family legacy.'

'Of course—and, yes, that's also part of why I'm inclined to consider marriage at this point. I know I have a duty to create a lasting legacy in the form of a family.'

Faye couldn't help but feel a little sad when she heard the way he laid that out, as if it were just something on a checklist. It was the way most of their peers in their milieu behaved towards having children—it was a strategic thing to secure bloodlines and fortunes. Not—heaven forbid—because they might actually want to invest in the notion of creating a family out of love.

But that was how she'd always envisaged having a family. Not because it was

strategic, but because she wanted to recreate the love and security her parents had given to her.

Faye wanted to feel relief that she was about to end this...whatever this was with Primo Holt...before it had even started, but what she did feel was a little more conflicted.

She said, ‘Well, I’m not in the market for having children. Under no circumstances. I won’t provide you with heirs, so ultimately this marriage would have no long-term benefit for you or your family name. It’ll have to be a business deal without the marital benefits, I’m afraid.’

Primo looked at Faye for a long moment. She epitomised sleek elegance, with her hair pulled back. She wore a silk shirt. Tailored trousers nipped in at her waist that drew the eye to her long legs.

The fire he’d sensed last night under the surface of that elegance was on full display now. He imagined the pulse throbbing at sensitive points of her body and his own body responded. He had to grit his jaw and call on every ounce of control he possessed not to embarrass himself.

He’d been curious to see if she’d have the same effect on him today, and if anything it was stronger. And what was disconcerting was the realisation that they’d orbited each other for years—all their lives—and this chemistry had been lying in wait until they’d come close enough to touch.

He focused on what she’d just said. She didn’t want children. That didn’t cause him a huge amount of concern at this point. They barely knew each other, after all. Surely after time spent together they would discuss the matter again and she might feel differently.

Primo's philosophy on having a family was basically: do no harm. The bar of parenting he'd experienced had been so low as to be practically non-existent. His mother's abandonment of her two sons hadn't been preceded by much care and attention, and yet Primo could remember having to pull his brother Quin away from where he'd been clinging on to their mother's legs as she'd tried to leave. Primo always carried that memory with him, as a reminder never to let his emotions get in the way of reality.

And their father might as well have abandoned them for all the care and attention he'd given them.

So, as far as Primo was concerned, if he did have a family, he would do his utmost to treat his children with respect and give them a sense of inclusion that he'd never experienced. As for anything more than that? That was in the realm of fiction and fantasies.

'Children...family...that's not something we have to discuss now. I realise that this is a lot to absorb.'

Faye was still tense. 'I don't think you're listening to me.'

Oh, Primo was listening. But she was telling him one thing with her mouth and another thing entirely with her eyes and the flush in her cheeks. While the electricity between them was strong enough to light up an entire state. He had an urge to close the distance between them and slide his hand around to the back of her neck, cover her mouth. He wanted to taste her. He imagined she was spicy and tart and sweet all at once. She would surprise him. He was sure of it. And he was still sure, in spite of her protestations, that she was the right choice for him.

She wasn't remotely intimidated by him. Anticipation burned low in his gut. He had to have her.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He said, 'I've told you that I think a union between us would be advantageous to any deal with your father, but if you don't want to marry me it won't affect that. I don't play games.'

She inclined her head slightly. 'I appreciate that. Even if you have admitted that a marriage would make the deal more binding.'

'All I ask is that you at least give this proposal some thought.'

He could almost see the inner struggle on her face behind those gold and green eyes. Mesmerising.

'Fine,' she eventually said, tight-lipped. 'I'll think about it. But I wouldn't hold your breath.'

Primo looked at her and said. 'I wouldn't dream of it. I think you'd enjoy watching my demise from lack of oxygen.'

To his surprise, Faye let out a helpless burst of laughter before quickly covering her mouth and sobering.

She wanted him.

He knew it.

He took a step backwards, even though everything in him resisted moving away from her, and said, 'Regardless of what you decide, Faye, you can't deny that there is

something between us.'

Before she could respond to that, either to agree or deny, Primo turned and walked out of the room.

It was only when he was in his car on the way back into town that he was able to reflect and realise that for the first time in a long time—if ever—he couldn't foretell what would happen.

Oh, he knew her father would agree to the deal—he'd be a fool not to. But as for Faye? Primo genuinely had no clue. She could go either way.

There was a tingling tightness in his gut...a sense of something shimmering just out of reach. It was so unusual and so rare that at first he didn't even know what it was. But then it struck him... What he was experiencing was as banal and common as a cold. It was excitement.

He let out a bark of surprised laughter at the notion, causing his driver to send him a concerned glance in the rearview mirror.

### CHAPTER THREE

FAYEHADJUST returned to her Manhattan apartment from visiting her father, after a trip to Los Angeles to secure a piece of sculpture for a client at an auction. It had been a week since she'd seen Primo Holt. But he'd started texting her twenty-four hours after they'd spoken.

Messages like:

Have you had a time to think about it yet?

She'd replied:

How did you get my number?

Your assistant was very helpful when I told him I needed to get some urgent assistance with an art purchase.

That's underhand.

I would have said enterprising. Well? Have you thought about it?

A decision like this requires more than twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours later, Primo had sent:

How about now?

I'm in LA. You just woke me up.

There's a great breakfast spot on Sunset. Angie's. Tell them I sent you.

Thanks for the rec but I know it already.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

You're welcome. Think about my proposal on the flight home.

I'll be sleeping.

Pity.

That provocative flirty response had sent flutters through Faye's body. No, not flutters. Something distinctly stronger and earthier. Something that scared her with its intensity. And it annoyed her because she had no doubt that he was just playing with her.

It had been a long time since anyone had been so direct. Since someone had wanted her. Even if it was for a marriage of convenience. But those last words he'd issued to her face had revolved in her head like a mantra all week.

'You can't deny that there is something between us.'

Disturbing. Intoxicating. Unbelievable.

Faye hated to admit it, but she'd spent much of her time when not working looking the man up online. There were scant details of his mother and father's divorce. Acrimonious. How his father had married again, numerous times. How his brother had refused his inheritance and become a self-made billionaire with his tech business and was now based in São Paulo. How Primo had taken the reins of the family business and within just a few years had tripled its fortunes and importance. Thousands of employees globally.

The man seemed to be indefatigable. In one twenty-four-hour period a journalist had accompanied him as he'd done a deal over breakfast in London, another in New York that afternoon, and by the same evening had been hosting a charity ball in Miami.

Faye could remember seeing him at that event, because it had taken place during a famous art fair held annually in the city. She remembered him wearing a white tuxedo jacket and looking vital and gorgeous. Not as if he'd just traversed the globe.

As for his private life—it was locked up tight. There were only a few photographs of him online with beautiful women. Each one more accomplished and impressive than the last. A human rights lawyer. A famous model turned philanthropist. An interior decorator. A fashion designer.

There were no salacious kiss-and-tells. No tabloid rumours. Only endless speculation as to when he was going to settle down and with whom.

And he wants you.

As his wife. Not a lover. It was probably second nature to a man like him to make a woman feel desired. He could have seduced her that first night and she probably would have succumbed, much to her shame.

Faye walked over to the window in her living room and took in the view of Central Park in the distance. She worried her lower lip—a bad habit.

While she'd been in Los Angeles her father had agreed to the deal with Primo. Her father looked years younger already...as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Faye's conscience pricked. She hadn't truly noticed how much of a burden the business had become.

She'd had lunch with her father after that conversation with Primo, and she'd told

him about the proposal.

He'd responded, 'You don't even know the man.'

Faye had explained about Primo taking her for a drink.

Her father had frowned, 'Is he using marriage as a bargaining chip?'

'Not exactly,' Faye had had to admit. 'He would still do the deal with you, to take over majority control of MacKenzie Enterprises, but...as he pointed out...a marriage would ensure his personal investment as well as the business deal.'

Her father has asked, 'What do you think of him?'

Faye had avoided answering that directly by asking, 'Would it be beneficial to you? If we married?'

Her father had shifted a little uncomfortably and hadn't been able to meet her eye. Faye's insides had sunk. Primo himself had confirmed it already. Of course it would be beneficial.

Eventually her father had sighed and looked at her. 'It would give us an added level of protection. He'd naturally be more invested in protecting his wife and father-in-law.'

Her father had reached for her hand with his and Faye had noticed how fragile he felt.

He'd said, 'I do worry about you, my dear. What are we going to do about you?'

'Daddy, you don't need to worry about me, I'm perfectly fine as I am.'

'Aren't you lonely, though? I was so lonely after your mother died... I know what it is

to be alone.'

His words echoed in her now, with a kind of hollow truth. In spite of her hectic work schedule she was lonely. More than she'd like to admit. And one of the most exciting men she'd met was expressing an interest in her.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

No, she corrected herself. He was expressing an interest in acquiring a convenient wife along with his new business venture.

At that moment her phone pinged with a message and she looked at it.

I want to marry you, Faye, so you're going to have to come up with something more compelling than a lack of desire to have children. Primo.

Faye put her hand to her mouth and let out a little helpless sound somewhere between laughter and a sob. It was as if he was inside her head, hearing her innermost thoughts.

It wasn't just that she wouldn't agree to have children. She couldn't have children. It was the reason why her first marriage had broken down. She'd got pregnant in textbook style, practically on their wedding night, but very early into the pregnancy she'd started bleeding and had been in intense pain. She'd been rushed to hospital for emergency surgery, where she'd had a miscarriage. There had been complications, and a few days later she'd had to have a partial hysterectomy. Her womb had been removed.

It had been utterly devastating and her relationship with her husband hadn't been strong enough to survive.

Faye had vowed never to put herself through that pain again—the pain of finding out so cruelly just how naive she'd been in believing that her husband loved her enough to want her just for herself. All she'd been to him was a trophy wife to stand by his side and a vessel to bear his heirs.

So why on earth would she agree to dive headlong into a marriage with someone who wanted her for the same thing? The only difference this time was that she was under no illusions that Primo Holt loved her. And she certainly didn't love him. She barely knew him.

He was bold, uncompromising. Faye should hate it that he was being so pushy. Demanding. But it wasn't hate she felt. It was something a lot more complicated. And, perhaps even more disturbingly, she felt a sense of curiosity.

In spite of every misgiving, Faye was filled with a sudden desire to consider taking something for herself. Reclaiming a part of her womanhood and reputation that had been decimated with the divorce. She could still remember the looks and whispers as people had wondered what on earth was wrong with her that she hadn't been able to hang on to her husband for even a year.

It had been so cruel. She'd felt like a failure as a woman because she'd failed to bring a pregnancy to term and would never bear a child.

The truth of her medical condition had never been made public, thankfully. Not even her father knew the full extent of her operation. It had been too raw and painful to share.

And so Faye had just held her head high and weathered the scrutiny and gossip until the next inevitable scandal had come along and she'd become yesterday's news.

But even today, after she'd healed so much from that early raw pain, there was an air of failure that seemed to cling to her in public. And pity. Maybe a marriage with Primo Holt would give her a chance to redeem herself. Not that she'd ever really needed that validation, but a small part of her still felt that pitying scrutiny whenever she stepped into a public space. Alone. And it did get to her, deep inside, down to the part of the wound that had never been allowed to fully heal.

Not only that, it would secure the business deal with her father and the family business. Protect them on another level. As Primo had said himself, he'd be 'more personally invested'.

A sense of illicit excitement gripped her as she entertained the notion of actually acquiescing to Primo's proposal. But the excitement dissolved a little when she thought of how she couldn't possibly offer him what he would ultimately need to secure his position—the next generation.

But maybe she could ensure that that would never be an issue. If he was willing to agree to her terms for a marriage.

Before she lost her nerve, Faye typed back a response to his last text:

I'm willing to discuss things further.

A text came back almost immediately.

Good, my assistant will be in touch to arrange a meeting.

Two weeks later, Manhattan

It was her wedding day. Faye's head was still spinning at the speed with which things had moved since she'd sent that text to Primo.

The speed of light.

The speed of Primo.

She was in the luxuriously spacious en suite bathroom of the penthouse suite in one of Manhattan's oldest and most iconic hotels.

Primo had booked her and her father in, insisting that they stay there rather than travel in and out of the city. A thoughtful gesture. They could have used Faye's Manhattan apartment, but this was far more convenient and comfortable.

On this same floor there was a function room where guests were already mingling. It was a small crowd. Intimate. Her father, some of their closest friends and their legal team. On Primo's side he had no family, just his legal team as witnesses.

Faye looked at her reflection in the mirror, feeling as if she was looking at someone else. She was wearing cream high-waisted tailored trousers, wide legged, teamed with a midriff-skimming long-sleeved sheer top overlaid with lace and intricate beading. Her hair was pulled back into a low chignon, and she wore classic pearls and the engagement ring Primo had surprised her with a couple of days after she'd agreed to marry him. A square yellow diamond with smaller triangular white diamonds on each side in a gold setting. It was an antique, from his family vault, and yet it felt surprisingly modern and very elegant. It also fitted snugly, without needing alteration. Something that had unsettled Faye a little—especially as she didn't consider herself to be remotely superstitious.

Just the previous day she had signed the final legal papers—a marriage agreement setting out the parameters of this union. She'd met with Primo in his offices over a week ago and laid out her terms for a marriage, all of which he'd agreed to—which had taken her by surprise.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Because there, in black and white, she'd made it clear that she would only agree to a marriage if they could review the situation in six months' time and decide at that point whether to carry on or divorce.

It gave Faye a get-out clause, and she was sure that Primo would want to get out by then too. Because she'd also made it clear that under no circumstances would she consider having children, so at least she could feel that she hadn't deceived him.

But you didn't tell him the full truth, pointed out a little voice.

No, she hadn't divulged the full extent of her infertility.

She had no intention of baring her innermost pain to someone who she hardly knew. After all, she wasn't planning on this being a long-term union. If Primo was so determined to marry her then this was how she was doing it. On her terms.

Six months of a marriage between the two families would solidify the business deal between her father and Primo, and give them added protection and security for the future. She'd ensured that there was a clause in the marriage agreement that, in the event of a divorce, it wouldn't have any detrimental effect on the business deal. And, as little as she knew Primo, he didn't strike her as a vindictive man.

Faye knew what she was doing was ruthless on some level, but it was no more ruthless than Primo expecting that he could secure himself a convenient wife on the back of a deal. And he'd made it very clear that this marriage had nothing to do with emotions, so there was no danger of hurting him. If anything, divorcing in six months would be an annoyance, but she was sure he could go to number two on his list of

potential wives and secure another bride.

And in the meantime you'll be married to a man you want for the next six months.

Faye flushed at that incendiary thought.

Her mind slipped back to Primo's offices a week ago. He'd looked at her from across his desk, leaning back in his chair, supremely relaxed. Fingers steeped before him. She'd noticed how masculine his hands were. Short, blunt nails. She'd imagined they'd be slightly calloused. Not soft. Hard. Like the rest of him.

'So you're saying that you don't want to cohabit and that you'll only agree to us appearing together in public at pre-agreed events?'

She'd nodded, a quiver in her belly, knowing that she must be pushing him to the edges of his patience with her list of requirements for their marriage agreement.

She'd said, 'I've been independent for a long time and I won't give that up. I've also got a busy work schedule, so I simply won't be available for every public outing. I might not even be in the same country. But I'm sure if an event is important enough, and organised far enough in advance, we can ensure you get what you need out of the arrangement.'

His eyes had flashed at that, sending more than a quiver through Faye.

He'd commented dryly, 'What I'm getting, by the sounds of it, is a part-time wife.'

He'd stood up then, and walked over to one of his floor-to-ceiling windows. His loose-limbed grace had caught Faye's eye more than the commanding views of lower Manhattan. The way his shirt pulled across his broad back and shoulders, hinting at the muscles underneath, the narrow waist and the firm buttocks—

He'd turned around to face her and Faye's face had flamed guiltily.

He'd said, 'If we don't live together, and only meet intermittently, then how do you suppose we'll consummate our marriage? Or will you do me the honour of cohabiting with me on our wedding night? I have every intention of this marriage being a real one, Faye. I don't sleep around and I'm not unfaithful. And I like sex.'

'I like sex.'

At that blunt pronouncement, Faye hadn't been able to stop a slew of images of their limbs entwined from spooling out in her head.

But he'd made it sound so...functional. Like something they'd do that was part of the agreement, to tick a box. He hadn't alluded to what he'd said before, about there being something between them. Did he know she wanted him and so he didn't feel the need to feign his own desire any more? She'd felt vulnerable. Exposed.

'No one needs to know the intimate details of where we're living. We both have busy lives.'

Primo had stalked back towards his desk and Faye had felt herself tensing against the way her skin prickled with anticipation. He'd perched on the edge of the desk, one strong thigh in Faye's peripheral vision. It had taken all of her strength and control to keep her gaze up. He'd been striking a dominant pose and yet she hadn't felt intimidated. She'd felt very keenly that he was curious about her reactions to him.

'That's not really answering my question.'

Faye's throat had suddenly been dry as sandpaper. 'I'm not saying we can't...consummate the marriage...'

After all, whispered a little voice, isn't this what you want too? Something out of this arrangement for you?

But the thought of surrendering to him on a more intimate level had been terrifying. Because without even touching her he'd made her feel things she'd never felt before—a kind of wild yearning. An awareness of herself that no other man had ever made her feel. A sense of not being fully in control. When he seemed to be scarily in control.

She'd forced her brain to work. 'I'm open to discussing making plans, but if you want to get married on the date you've specified, I'm afraid I'm already booked on a flight to Venice that evening. I have clients lined up to meet during Carnival.'

Primo had narrowed his gaze on her before saying dryly, 'Discussing making plans to consummate our marriage? How romantic.'

The disdain in his voice when he'd said that had made Faye stand up. She'd shot back, 'We both know this isn't about romance, but if you're going to mock me then perhaps you need to look for another convenient bride.'

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Primo had stood up too and regarded her. 'Forgive me. I don't mean to mock. You know where I stand on the fantasy of romance in marriage. But I would like this marriage to function, and for it to function we need to be aligned in public and in private. If you don't think that is possible then maybe this is not a good idea.'

She'd overreacted. And Faye had felt even more exposed. Primo had agreed to all of her terms, and it obviously made sense for their marriage to appear as real as possible.

Aware of the stakes if she pulled out at that point, she'd taken a breath and said, 'I do think it's possible. I want this marriage to work too.'

For six months at the most.

There was a knock on the door at that moment, jolting Faye out of her memories of last week. She said absently, 'Come in.'

It was her father, stooped and walking unsteadily with two sticks. Even so, he looked dapper in his steel-grey three-piece suit. He was determined to walk her down the aisle. Her father knew well that this was no love-match, but she could see that he hoped it might become something enduring. She hadn't told him of her terms. Her conscience pricked, but she told herself that the long-term benefits of having been married to Primo Holt even for a brief period would be worth it.

Her father looked at her with suspiciously shiny eyes. 'You remind me so much of your mother...you look beautiful.'

Now Faye's eyes stung. 'No one was as beautiful as Mother.'

Her father said a little gruffly, 'They're ready for us.'

Faye sucked in a breath and gathered up her matching cropped jacket and the posy of flowers—yellow and cream, matching her outfit and the engagement ring. She hadn't even thought to organise flowers. Primo had done it.

She went to her father and forced a smile, slipping an arm through one of his. 'Let's go, then, shall we?'

Primo didn't like how on edge he felt. Almost...nervous. Which was ridiculous. He couldn't ever remember feeling nervous in his life. But right now he was definitely not feeling his usual level of confidence.

Arrogance.

Faye had accused him of being arrogant. As he'd told her, he'd be the first to admit to it. But he wasn't so arrogant that it made him blind to things. He certainly wasn't blind to the fact that Faye MacKenzie was an enigma.

He knew she was marrying him for her own ends—to shore up the business deal with her father and to bolster her own reputation after a failed early marriage and years of being something of a social outlier. In spite of professing not to care what people thought, she was human, and no one was immune to the lingering toxicity of an old scandal.

But apart from that...? He knew she wasn't mercenary. She had a family fortune of her own to inherit. Not to mention a very lucrative and successful career as one of the world's most respected art brokers.

So, was she marrying him because she was also getting something more personal out of it? He wasn't so sure after she'd informed him that they'd have to make a plan to consummate their marriage.

Usually women were only too happy to bare all with him as soon as possible—physically and emotionally. But not this woman. She looked at him with those gold and green eyes warily.

He knew there was heat between them. The moment they were in the same room he felt it like a live current. Maybe he should have kissed her that day when she'd come to his office, looking so prim in a trouser suit. Accusing him of mocking her. He'd wanted to kiss her. To muss up her hair. Undo the buttons of her blouse. Mess with that pristine elegant surface and demonstrate the physical benefits of a marriage that had nothing to do with romance.

The prospect of that made his blood hum with anticipation.

But at that moment a hush went over the group of people in the function room. The back of Primo's neck prickled as the celebrant came and stood before him and gave a cue to the string quartet, who started playing music.

For a moment Primo felt an almost superstitious reluctance to turn around to see his bride. But then, telling himself he was being ridiculous, because this really was just a slightly more personal and intimate form of a business deal, he turned around and was instantly awe-struck.

Faye was stunning.

Primo barely noticed her father, or how slowly she walked with him to keep pace. He drank her in. She was elegant and cool and sexy all at once in a wide-legged trouser suit. Hair pulled back. Make-up discreet. He saw the flash of her yellow diamond

engagement ring and felt a surge of possessiveness to think of one of his ancestor's rings on her hand, marking her as his. It was a deeply primal and uncool sentiment to feel, but he couldn't help it. Primo had never felt possessive of a woman in his life; when those games started he would be gone.

She wore a top under her jacket that at first sight looked transparent, sending his pulse into overdrive, but then he realised it was sheer, not transparent, and overlaid with beaded lace. Edgy. Sophisticated. He hadn't known what she would wear, and from what he'd seen of her so far she clearly favoured a modern kind of elegance.

She reached him. Her scent was subtle and made him want to lean closer. Roses and musk...and something much more sharp cutting through those classic notes.

She looked at him with those wide hazel eyes. They glowed green today, enhanced by her subtle make-up. Long lashes. Mouth slick with a colour that looked like wine.

Primo suddenly had an image of taking a glass of wine and tipping it over her bare skin before licking it—

'Take care of her. She's precious to me.'

Primo's wayward imaginings dissolved under the unmistakably steely tone of Faye's father as he handed his daughter to her fiancé. He forced himself to meet the man's eyes and said with full sincerity, 'I intend to take very good care of her.' His gaze went to Faye's. 'If she allows me.'



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Faye made a slightly strangled-sounding noise as her father put her hand into Primo's. He curled his fingers around it securely, not even sure at this late moment that she wouldn't try to walk away. The fact that he still wasn't sure of her after she'd laid down a slew of ultimatums before agreeing to this marriage told him all he needed to know about how exciting it would be to marry her.

As for those ultimatums—no cohabiting and only going to prearranged social events. They didn't perturb him. It wasn't as if he was suddenly ready to cohabit either, but it would be more practical, long-term. In six months she'd have grown comfortable in his world—he was sure of it.

What if she wants out?asked a little voice.

He dismissed it immediately. She wouldn't want out. He could only enhance her social standing and add to her business contacts. Her father would be reaping the benefits of not having to worry about the family business.

Primo slid her a glance now, as the celebrant welcomed them. Faye was presenting him with her very perfect side profile, not a hair out of place. Once again, her remoteness made his fingers itch to undo her—literally. Because he could see the pulse under her skin. Fast. He imagined it as hot as his.

Turning this marriage from part-time into full-time, and revealing the woman under the sky-high walls she hid behind, was a challenge that fizzed in his veins. And her insistence about not having a family? He wasn't too bothered about that... Let him persuade her first that they could be good together, and then they could move on to the next phase: to build an enduring marriage with a legacy that would last for

generations.

Primo faced forward, Faye's hand in his, and vowed that this marriage would be as successful as every other venture he'd ever invested in. Failure wasn't an option. Not for Primo Holt.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Venice Carnival, two days later

FAYEHATEDTHATshe felt so conspicuously alone. Especially as she was now a married woman and the reason she was alone was her insistence on coming here for work.

She could be on her honeymoon; even arranged marriages indulged in arranged honeymoons. But she'd insisted on sticking to her work schedule, and now she felt a bit like a child who had overplayed her hand.

The simple gold wedding band that Primo had slipped onto her finger only two days ago was heavy. She resisted the urge to look at it and see how it nestled against the engagement ring. Markers of his possession of her. When he hadn't yet possessed her at all. Not like that.

She felt a little breathless.They'd only shared a kiss. But that kiss would be burned onto her memory for ever. The civil wedding ceremony had passed in a blur of vows and promises that she'd been too conscious of Primo to focus on. Standing beside her. So tall and broad.

If she hadn't had to walk down that aisle at a snail's pace to meet Primo she might have stumbled at her first view of him waiting for her. He'd been dressed in a light grey three-piece suit, with a slightly darker silk tie and a white shirt. He'd had a small

sprig of flowers in his lapel matching her posy. A touch that had made Faye feel inordinately emotional and somehow guilty. She'd put no thought into the wedding plans, leaving it all up to Primo's team.

But apart from all of that he'd been almost too beautiful to look at directly. Not beautiful. Gorgeous. And sexy. Filling out his suit in a way that drew the eye to his powerful physique. Hard jaw. Firm mouth.

And then that mouth had been coming towards hers before she'd been able to prepare herself, and the kiss that she'd thought about from the moment she'd met him had been every bit as terrifyingly exposing as she'd feared it would be.

Faye had been on dates in the decade since her divorce. She'd even taken some lovers. But not one had ever ignited such a burning inferno inside her. Not even her husband had done that, she'd realised in that moment. It was as if there'd been a spark deep within her, just waiting for Primo to ignite it fully.

When Primo had pulled back, it had taken an age for her to open her own eyes. She'd realised he was practically supporting her as her legs had turned to jelly. Mortifyingly, before she'd been able to gather her wits, he'd leant close again and said, for her ears only, 'See? I told you there was something between us. I look forward to getting to know you better...wife.'

Those words had made her insides swoop and dive like a besotted teenager's. She'd pulled back, terrified he'd see just how much his kiss had impacted her. How much the knowledge that he did want her impacted her.

But he'd simply smirked, as if he could hear her every thought, and taken her hand, tucking it under his arm, making sure she was all but welded to his side as he'd strolled back down the makeshift aisle and the quartet had played a sunny, joyful tune.

A short time later they'd sat together for lunch. Primo had taken a sip of wine and said, 'You're still insisting on going to Venice this evening?'

Faye had only had to think of that kiss and the way he'd smirked at her to nod her head fervently and say, 'Absolutely. I can't let my clients down.'

'Shame. Maybe I could come with you? I'm due to take a short break, actually. I could play house husband while you work?'

Faye had immediately been rewarded with an image of a naked Primo lounging amongst rumpled sheets in the midst of the fading grandeur of a palazzo, awaiting her return like some louche playboy, there for her pleasure...

Faye shook her head to dislodge the memory.

At that moment a waiter in an all-black silk Pierrot suit with a mask covering his face passed by with a tray, and she swiped a glass of sparkling wine before her imagination went any more rampant. She took a big sip.

She was here at the Carnival to meet with some clients and visit art galleries. She'd just negotiated a couple of deals totalling in the millions, and she should be savouring her success, but it felt hollow. Because for the first time she was noticing that she had no one to share it with.

Damn Primo Holt for awakening a weakness inside her.

And more. Desire.

It just went to show that she didn't have to scratch far beneath the surface to unearth vulnerabilities she hadn't felt in a long time. So much for her prized independence!

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

She took in her surroundings, forcing her mind away from thinking of him. The masked ball was taking place in a centuries-old palazzo, right on the Grand Canal. Candles and soft lighting turned everything golden. The costumes people wore were as elaborate as the palazzo, with its wall murals, frescoed ceilings and Murano glass chandeliers. Some men were in simple classic tuxedos and some in capes and silk shirts, like heroes from a romantic historical novel, all wearing masks.

The women's dresses ranged from modern evening gowns to costumes that would have made Marie Antoinette look shy and retiring, complete with wigs and stunning decorative masks with feathers and jewels.

Soft music came from a masked string quartet.

There wasn't a jarring note of modernity anywhere. Faye could easily imagine that she'd been transported back in time by a couple of hundred years.

She rolled her eyes at herself, glad of the scarlet lace mask that covered half her face. It matched her dress, and the lace choker around her throat. Her hair was piled high into a chignon—she'd aimed for artfully rough and messy, because she'd had to do it herself. The dress was strapless. Lace over silk. The bodice was fitted over her chest and to her waist and then fell in voluminous folds to the floor. It wasn't as eye-catching as some of the costumes, but she didn't mind that. She'd never particularly liked to draw attention.

But you like the attention Primo gives you.

Faye's insides clenched. Perhaps she'd been too hasty, insisting on coming to Venice.

Because right now she could be consummating her marriage, and not feeling this awful sense of regret and hollowness spreading throughout her—

‘Waiting for someone?’

Faye’s racing mind stopped dead. The little hairs rose up all over her exposed skin. His voice. No. It couldn’t be. Was she so desperate that she was imagining him?

The back of her neck tingled. She turned around and came face to chest with a tall, broad man dressed all in black, with a cape tied at his throat and thrown carelessly over one shoulder. She looked up. His face was half covered with a hawk-like mask, revealing a firm jaw and that mouth. That mouth she could probably pick out of a line-up even though they’d only kissed once.

For an incredible moment Faye could almost imagine that a couple of hundred years had melted away and they’d slipped back in time. He looked like a buccaneer. A marauding pirate. She felt breathless. Her heart was pounding. Her insides were melting, turning hot and languorous.

Somehow she managed to say, ‘No, I’m not waiting for anyone.’

He cocked his head to one side. ‘Shame. You look a little lonely.’

Faye felt her faculties return and lied through her teeth. ‘Not lonely at all.’

‘A woman as beautiful as you shouldn’t be here alone.’

Faye almost rolled her eyes. ‘Have you said that to many women this evening?’

He shook his head. ‘No, just you. But perhaps I have it wrong, maybe you’re avoiding someone.’

Faye smiled sweetly. 'Wrong on both counts. I'm here for work, actually, at the invitation of a kind client.'

'Who has left you here alone? Very remiss of her.'

'Him, actually.'

His eyes flashed behind his mask. The black made them look very blue, and his skin look even darker. 'This...client... Was he trying to foster a more personal relationship?'

'That's really none of your business.'

'Isn't it?' was the swift response.

After all, even though they hadn't acknowledged each other's identity, this was her husband. For the first time Faye felt a thrill go through her at the thought that this was her man. And he had come all the way here for her. And he might be jealous.

Or maybe he hadn't and wasn't. She felt exposed...a far too common sensation around this man...

'Tell me,' she asked, 'are you here for business too?'

He shook his head. 'Would you believe that up until this morning I had no plans to come here. I can't explain it, but I felt a calling...maybe it was because I saw you in a dream and I wanted to see if you could be real.'

Faye hated how those words affected her. Because he'd said them blithely, with no care, and because it highlighted the part of her that reacted to words like that. Wanting the sentiment to be real.

‘I am real, and I’m pretty certain I didn’t appear in your dreams.’

He looked at her. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure about that.’



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

A moment tautened between them, alive with electricity. A waiter came by and the man in black—Faye refused to acknowledge who he really was just yet, like a coward—took a drink and deftly swapped her half-finished one for a fresh glass.

Then he said, ‘Join me on the balcony? It’s a little stuffy in here.’

Faye nodded and let him take her gloved hand, leading her through the crowd to open French doors leading to a balcony. Another couple were at the other end, heads close together.

She still couldn’t quite believe that he was here. That she’d been lamenting acting too hastily only a moment before he’d appeared.

They stood together and for a moment nothing was said. They took in the iconic and impressive view of the Grand Canal and the palazzos on the other side, lights shining from windows, each one a portal into another life, or lives, being played out as they had been here for hundreds of years.

‘The history of this place has always humbled me.’

Faye looked at the man in surprise, and then almost felt irritation. Would he stop reading her mind? She shook her head at her own ridiculousness.

He obviously saw her reaction and said, ‘What? Did I say something wrong?’

‘No.’ She couldn’t help smiling a little. ‘I was just thinking the same thing.’

He was looking down at her. She couldn't read his expression. She was glad of their masks, creating this barrier between them. Then he reached out and touched her mouth with a finger, but it was so fleeting that she wasn't sure if she imagined it, even though her lip tingled.

He said, 'Look, let's stop this—

Before he could emit another word Faye blurted out, 'Can we not? Please?'

She knew he was about to dismantle this shimmering delicate facade of anonymity and she wasn't ready. She felt a little foolish, but she really, really wanted to preserve this moment, and she didn't want to analyse why it was so important to her. Something about not being ready to face the reality of why they'd married. For a business deal. She wanted him to want her, uniquely, and felt somehow protected behind the flimsy lace mask. As if it disguised the truth of their situation and how badly she wanted him.

'Can we leave?' she asked, before she lost her nerve. Before reality could return.

For a moment he said nothing, and Faye was afraid he'd make some flippant remark, but suddenly the air was infused with a sense of urgency. He just nodded, took her hand again and led her back into the room, dispensing with their glasses en route to the entrance. From there he led her down to the ground level, where a water taxi was waiting.

Faye hadn't even noticed that she'd left her cape behind until Primo was undoing the silk tie on his and taking it off and putting it around her bare shoulders. It still held the warmth of his body, imprinting onto her skin, making it rise up into goosebumps.

'Thank you.'

She glanced at him through the gauzy lace of her mask. His mouth looked firm.

‘You’re welcome.’

He sat beside her and put an arm across the back of the seat. Faye knew she should ask where they were going, but she was too afraid of shattering this illusion that they were strangers taking a moment out of time. When the reality was anything but that.

For a second, it struck Faye that perhaps this man she’d left the party with was in fact a stranger, and that she’d projected her desire for her husband onto him, willing him to be Primo. But when she sneaked a glance at him again, she could see the distinctive jaw under the mask. Hard and stern.

As if sensing her looking at him, he turned. The hawkish mask should have made him look scary against the backdrop of a moonlit Venice but she felt only excitement. His eyes were very blue. It was Primo. Her husband.

The boat’s engine had stopped now, and they were being steered into a landing pier that was attached to a soaring four-storey palazzo.

‘What is this place?’ Faye asked, in spite of her wanting to maintain the charade of anonymity.

The fact that it was obviously one of Venice’s older palazzos was obvious. It was one she’d noticed on her trips up and down the canal. She knew who owned most of them, but not this one. Which usually meant very old money.

Primo replied, ‘I own the top-floor apartment. The rest of the palazzo is owned by the Monegazio family.’

Faye’s sucked in breath of shock that was disguised by the fact that Primo was

getting out of the boat. He extended a hand to her and she took it, holding her dress up with the other hand as she stepped onto concrete.

The Monegazio family were one of Venice's oldest and most venerated. They had a private art collection that was the stuff of legend. It had never been seen in public. And apparently her husband owned their top-floor apartment.

Primo badeciaoandgrazieto the boat taxi driver and led her to huge ornate doors that opened as if by magic as they approached. An elegant older man was on the other side, dressed in black trousers and a long-sleeved black jumper.

Faye heard him address the man as Matteo, and they exchanged a few words in Italian. Clearly he was some kind of concierge. The man dipped his head towards Faye in greeting, and then disappeared through an open door off the main entrance hall. Presumably his apartment.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Primo led her deeper into the palazzo. Faye got a tantalising glimpse of vast canvases on the walls as they walked over faded ornate rugs. There was a big table with a massive vase of fresh flowers.

She suddenly realised they were standing at modern gleaming metal doors. Primo pressed a button. Faye let out a surprised huff of laughter. ‘An elevator? Isn’t that a little sacrilegious in a place like this?’

‘This was part of what they needed my money for. The oldest member of the family, the matriarch, is confined to a wheelchair now, so the palazzo had to be made accessible. They’re asset-rich and cash-poor.’

The elevator doors opened, revealing a very standard and modern interior. It was jarring after her feeling that they’d been transported back in time. The elevator ascended and the doors opened again into a large marble-floored entrance hall. There was a circular table there, upon which sat a piece of modern sculpture. Faye recognised the artist instantly, and would have stopped to inspect it more closely, but Primo was ahead of her, striding into a living area and turning on low lights.

She followed, and her jaw dropped. It was a vast open space with windows out to the canal on either side, as this palazzo was not adjoining any others. One side of the room was a sumptuous living space, and subtle dividers at the other end demarked a dining area with a big, generous table. Oriental rugs overlaid a traditional terrazzo floor. Everything was cream and gold and very, very, luxurious.

She looked up; the ceiling was ablaze with ornate frescoes. Cherubs and angels and clouds and skies. It should have looked ridiculous. It didn’t.

‘It’s...’ Faye struggled to find words to describe the beauty around her. She couldn’t.

‘It’s a little more...ornate than I would normally go for, but it suits the surroundings.’

Faye nodded. ‘It would have been criminal to turn this into a minimalist space.’

‘Drink?’

Faye realised that Primo had moved over to a drinks cabinet. She felt unsteady, as if they were on a ship. And, considering the water all around them, it wasn’t a totally ridiculous notion.

She relished the thought of some fortification. ‘Sure.’

He looked at her. ‘A gin martini?’

He remembered her drink of choice. She felt a little jolt in her belly but shook her head. ‘Too strong. A glass of prosecco would be fine, if you have it.’

He inclined his head and was soon approaching her with a flute of golden sparkling wine and holding a glass of what looked like whisky for himself.

He held out his glass. ‘Saluti.’

Faye clinked her glass against his and echoed his toast. She took a sip. The effervescent wine bubbled down her throat. Perfectly chilled and fragrant. Like the excitement mixed with trepidation fizzing in her veins. She’d never felt like this before sleeping with other men. Not because she was so confident, but because none of them had ever affected her on such a deep, visceral level.

He lifted a hand and gestured towards his face. ‘If you don’t mind?’

Faye's heart thumped. It would be ridiculous to ask him to keep it on.

She shook her head. 'Not at all.'

But as he unmasked himself she moved away a little, and looked at the canvases on the walls. They were all impressive, all originals, and did not follow any discernible pattern.

Faye stood before one. 'You have a Renoir.'

Primo came and stood beside her. 'As you can see, my collection is somewhat...eclectic,' he said, and his tone was self-deprecating. 'I can't claim to have any great knowledge. I tend to choose something if I like it, rather than because it's of strategic importance or because it fits into a narrative.'

Faye continued around the walls, taking in a snowy Dutch landscape. 'Truly, that's the best way to buy art—not because you should or because something is in fashion.'

'Is that how you buy art?'

Faye looked at him. He was watching her, his face no longer hidden, a shoulder leaning against the wall. For a second she couldn't breathe. He looked so beautiful.

How could this man really want her?

She was nothing that special.

She struggled to remember what he'd just asked her. Art. How did she buy art.

She shook her head. 'Actually, apart from curating my own family's collection, I don't collect a lot of art. I'm too conscious of what my clients are looking for. I have

bought pieces along the way, but invariably I end up selling them on.'



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

Primo took her glass out of her hand and put it down, then said, 'Give me your hands.'

Faye did so, bemused. Primo tugged off the gloves that matched the dress. Silly to feel so exposed when it was only her hands. Primo put the gloves aside and then took the hand upon which her engagement and wedding ring sat and lifted it.

He arched a brow. 'You're a married woman?'

Faye scowled at him and he let her hand go, putting his hands up. 'You're the one still hiding behind a mask.'

Reluctant to let go of the last shred of illusion, but knowing it was silly to keep it up, she turned around and presented Primo with her back. For a long moment Primo did nothing, and Faye almost turned around again, but then she felt his hands at the back of her head, undoing the mask. It fell into her hand.

She would have turned around then, but Primo's fingers were in her hair and he was pulling out the pins holding up her chignon. Strands of hair started to fall down around her shoulders. When all the pins were out, he speared her hair with his fingers and massaged her scalp.

Faye had not expected that. She closed her eyes at the delicious sensations of Primo's big hands on her head. She felt like purring. She forced her eyes open and turned, dislodging his hands.

His eyes were a very bright blue. He said, 'You're still wearing your cape.'

Faye lifted her chin in a silent gesture for him to undo it. He did, his fingers making light work of the tie. She shivered lightly as it fell to the floor, baring her shoulders and the top of her chest.

He put out a hand and Faye looked at it for a moment before putting her hand in his. His fingers closed around hers and he led her from the living area, down a corridor to another doorway.

His bedroom.

It was a feast for the senses. Parquet flooring. A Murano glass chandelier. Hand-painted wallpaper in the Chinoiserie style. Gold trim. French doors leading directly out to a balcony overlooking the Grand Canal. A vast bed with a Rococo-style headboard trimmed with gold. Pristine white linen.

Faye couldn't take her eyes off the bed, but then Primo said, 'Okay?'

He was giving her permission to say no. Something about that consideration, especially now that they were married, made a piece of Faye's defences crumble.

She nodded. She couldn't not. She wanted him.

But just when she thought he'd waste no time in getting her on her back, he said, 'Look up.'

She did, a little bemused, and gasped out loud. The ceiling was an explosion of colour and clouds and cherubs, much like the ceiling in the main room, but there was a subtle difference to this one. She recognised the artist and couldn't quite believe it.

'Tiepolo?' she asked, naming a famous Venetian painter known for his Rococo style. There'd been rumours that he'd worked on palazzos for private families, but she'd

never seen the evidence.

‘Yes.’

‘This ceiling must be priceless,’ she breathed.

‘It is. I own this entire apartment, but I don’t own this ceiling,’ Primo revealed.

‘Art like this belongs to the world, not to one person.’

‘Indeed.’

Eventually Faye took her gaze down from the ceiling to look at Primo. The air seemed to quiver between them.

He reached out a hand and pushed a lock of hair over one shoulder. ‘Do you know how exquisite you are?’

Faye ducked her head, but he tipped up her chin with a finger. She said, ‘You don’t need to say things...like that. I’m not here to be wooed. We’re married. This is an arrangement.’

Primo’s eyes flashed with something, but Faye couldn’t decipher the emotion. He said, ‘We wouldn’t have to be married for me to have wanted you out of all the women at that party.’

Faye gulped. ‘But I’m nothing—’

Primo put a finger to her mouth, stopping her words. And then, before she could take another breath, his finger was replaced with his mouth and she was pulled tight into his body, his hands around her waist.

After a long, drugging moment he pulled back. Faye struggled to open her eyes...focus. Primo's eyes were so hot she felt seared.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He said, 'Don't ever suggest you're nothing again.'

Faye swallowed. She could taste him. 'I...okay.'

This was a wholly new sensation for her. Not just because she hadn't had sex in a while, but also, she realised now, because she instinctively chose men she felt in control around. With this man, she was not in control. But she trusted him. And that was almost scarier to acknowledge, when she'd spent the last decade keeping herself very protected.

He took his hands down and without taking his gaze from hers started to undress. Slowly, methodically, taking every piece of his clothing off until he was naked.

Faye's blood was sizzling and it hurt to keep her gaze up.

He said, 'You can look. I won't break.'

There was a thread of amusement in his voice. It emboldened Faye to drop her gaze down and...

Oh. My. God. The man was hewn out of living, breathing rock.

Broad shoulders and chest. A smattering of hair. Muscles that could have been carved and shaded by an artist. Golden skin. Slim hips. The darker hair at his groin where his body was hard. Thick and long.

Faye's eyes widened. He was magnificent. Every inch of him virile and unashamedly

masculine.

‘I’m feeling a little underdressed here,’ he said, reminding her that she was still in her own costume, which suddenly felt restrictive. She reached for the zip at the side of the dress, under her arm, and started to tug it down. But it got stuck.

Primo stepped forward. ‘Let me.’

Faye lifted her arm and Primo tugged at the zip until it gave way under his fingers. Of course it did. She couldn’t imagine this man touching anything—even an inanimate object—and it not giving way to his touch.

The dress loosened around her chest, but to her surprise Primo held her arm up and pressed his mouth against the underside of her arm. A shudder of pure desire went through Faye. It felt like a shockingly intimate act.

He let her arm go. Primo stood in front of her again and slowly peeled the dress from her chest and then down and then with a tug over her hips it was falling to the floor.

Now she stood before him in nothing but a matching underwear set—strapless bra—and her shoes. She kicked them off, which lowered her a few inches, making her feel tiny next to Primo’s formidable height and bulk. But she didn’t feel nervous or intimidated.

He was looking at her, that bright gaze lingering on her breasts, spilling out of the flimsy bra cups, moving down to her belly and hips and thighs.

‘You are beautiful.’

Faye wanted to say the same thing to him, but felt shy.

Thankfully Primo took her by the hand again and led her to the bed. He sat down and pulled her between his legs.

‘Turn around,’ he ordered gruffly.

She did, and felt him undo her bra, letting it fall to the floor. Then he tugged her panties over her hips and down. She stepped out of them. Now she was fully naked.

He gently urged her to turn around again, and when she did his mouth was at the same level as her breasts. He cupped one fleshy weight and leaned forward, placing his hot mouth around one straining peak. Faye’s head fell back and her hands speared his hair in a bid to hold on to something.

She was lost in a vortex of sucking, drugging heat, with a wire of tension linking directly from her nipple to between her legs. She didn’t even realise her legs had given way until she was in his lap with his arms around her. Her pulse was thundering.

He stood up, taking her with him, and laid her on the bed. He went to retrieve something from a drawer, muttering something about not being able to last, and when Faye realised it was protection she said, ‘It’s okay...’

He looked at her with the foil packet unopened in his hand.

She said, ‘I won’t get pregnant. It’s okay.’ She deliberately didn’t elaborate, and knew he most likely assumed she meant she was taking the contraceptive pill.

He put down the protection and came over to the bed, ‘I’m clean. I get tested, and it’s been a while since I had a lover.’

‘Me too,’ said Faye, feeling shy again.

He came over her on both arms, muscles bunching under his gleaming skin. Faye couldn't quite believe that Primo Holt was looking at her with such...naked hunger.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

He kissed her again, an arm going under her back, arching her up to him so that her breasts were pressed against his chest, the hair there a delicious abrasion against her sensitised skin.

She moved restlessly under him, growing bolder, a hand seeking and finding his erection, wrapping around him, and glorying in the sheer evidence of his arousal. For her. It was the biggest aphrodisiac in the world.

And then he took his hand from him, saying again, 'I won't last. I need to be inside you.'

Faye needed no encouragement. She spread her legs around him and he guided himself to the centre of her body. Their skin was slick. Faye was panting. Primo teased her for a moment, dragging the head of his erection along her folds. She lifted her hips, causing him to impale her a little. Her eyes nearly rolled to the back of her head.

He let out a huff of laughter and said something like, 'I knew we'd be good together.' But she couldn't be sure. She was half crazed.

'Please...'

'Open your eyes. I want you to be sure you know who you're making love to. Not some random stranger from a masked ball.'

She looked at him. 'Of course I knew it was you...'

Even as you tried to pretend it wasn't, reminded a little voice.

Faye put her hands on Primo's arms. 'Please, Primo...'

It was as if saying his name broke some last shred of his control and he was sinking into her, stretching her so wide that she gasped.

He stopped. 'Am I hurting you?'

She shook her head, unable to speak. She squeezed his arms, urging him on, and he sank deeper. Faye could feel her body accept him and mould around his length, taking him in all the way until she didn't know where he ended and she began.

She'd never known making love could be so...intense. And Primo had barely even moved. And then he did, pulling back out and then moving in again. Slow, methodical movements, making the tension wind tighter and tighter.

His movements got faster, and Faye's entire body was as taut as a bow. He put a hand under her bottom and squeezed the firm flesh, then brought his hand around to where their bodies met. With one flick of his finger, a storm broke inside Faye's body and she was sent flying so high she wasn't sure if she'd ever return to the woman she'd been.

Primo's movements were more frenzied, wild, and with a guttural cry he stilled inside her, his body jerking as he too was split apart by pleasure.

## CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN PRIMOWOKE, he kept his eyes shut and savoured the feelings in his body. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so heavy. Replete. Images and sensations came back to him. Soft lips...sweet mouth. Firm breasts with spiky

nipples...rolling them in his mouth and sucking...making her moan. Silky, heavy hair trailing through his fingers...wrapping that hair around his palm as he drove into the tightest, silkiest embrace...his body responding instantly, hardening...

Primo wanted her again.Now.

He squinted in the soft dawn light coming in through the curtains and put out a hand...but met nothing. His eyes opened fully and he came up on one arm. The bed was empty, but still faintly warm. She wasn't long gone.

He sank back. He didn't have to investigate further to know that she was already gone. His instinct had been right. Together, they'd been explosive. More than he'd even anticipated. He'd never felt such chemistry with a woman before.

His gamble to come to Venice to seduce her had paid off.

He hadn't felt resentful or irritated that his new wife wouldn't give him a wedding night. He appreciated that they hardly knew each other. And that this marriage was founded on the back of a business deal.

He'd known she was skittish around him. Clearly her first marriage had burned her. She'd said it hadn't been good.

The lingering satisfaction in Primo's body made his mouth curve up in a smile. Maybe now that she'd seen how good they were together she would relax a little more into her role as his wife.

Primo sprang from the bed and walked naked over to the French doors, pulling them open. He stepped out onto the balcony and looked down to see a water taxi moving away from the landing pier, a distinctive head of black hair, tumbled over shoulders, and the scarlet flash of a dress. The taxi sped away, taking his wife to her next

destination.

Primo's smile got wider.

He had no doubt that she was going to lead him a merry dance, but if last night was anything to go by he would enjoy every second of being married to Faye MacKenzie. And sooner or later, she would give up on those terms.

At that moment there was a sound of collective giggling, and Primo looked away from the taxi to see another taxi near the palazzo, full of tourists who were all looking up at him and pointing. He put his hands modestly over his groin area and, still grinning, bowed and went back inside.

Faye willed the boat taxi to go faster, so people wouldn't be able to look inside and see her sitting there still dressed in her costume, hair undone, make-up melted off in the heat of passion.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

She groaned silently when she recalled the previous night. Not even the fresh air of the spring morning could dilutethosememories.

She was doing the walk of shame—albeit in a boat in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. That didn't make it any less mortifying.

She'd never experienced sex like that. So...urgent. Raw. Powerful. After that first time, she was pretty sure she'd fallen into a deep sleep. And then at some point she'd woken in the night, to find Primo wrapped around her body. She'd tried to move, but his embrace had tightened, and then she'd felt his body, hardening against hers.

Within seconds they'd been entwined again, and this time it had been even more urgent. Mind-blowing. She'd never had a lover like him. He'd opened her eyes to a depth of sensuality inside her that she'd never known existed.

Her cheeks were still burning at the thought of how he'd react to find her gone. But she'd had to leave. The thought of sitting with him and doing something as banal as sharing breakfast had seemed—ridiculously—like an intimacy too far after what they'd shared.

And it wasn't as if she wasn't going to see him again. They were married! They were due to attend an annual charity gala ball in Manhattan later that week. A social staple. A chance, as Primo had put it, to introduce themselves to society as a married couple.

But right now Faye had no idea how she'd ever look him in the face again. She'd been so...wanton. Lustful. He'd turned her into some hungry, base creature. And yet as the sight of her hotel came into view, and the taxi started slowing down, she

couldn't help a tiny secret smile forming on her mouth. Because he'd unlocked something inside her and she couldn't in all conscience be sorry. Her whole body was still tingling in the aftermath.

She was about as far removed from her usual pristinely put-together self as she could be, but the sense of languorous satisfaction in her blood drowned out any need to be concerned about it.

The boat landed at the pier. A hotel attendant stepped forward to help her out of the taxi. As she walked into the foyer she passed a couple whose eyes widened when they saw her. Faye swallowed back an urge to giggle. She felt like explaining to them that she wasn't coming back from an illicit night of debauchery with a total stranger—that she had, in fact, just spent the night with her husband...

But that thought sobered her.

As she ascended to her room in the elevator she had to remind herself that Primo following her to Venice and seeking her out merely demonstrated his determination to get this marriage started. It hadn't been a romantic gesture. It had been entirely practical. And she hadn't even hesitated to acquiesce, too blinded by his spontaneity and sheer charisma.

She couldn't afford to forget the terms she'd laid out for this marriage and the knowledge that it was short-term only. Because she was realising after last night that this man could destroy her in ways she'd never been destroyed before. There was too much at stake—her precious independence and her bone-deep need to protect herself from being hurt all over again.

The Griff Benefit, Manhattan

The annual benefit ball to raise funds for cancer research was one of New York's

biggest social events. It was held in one of Manhattan's most iconic hotels. Invitations were sent out by a board made up of New York's oldest names, and receiving an invitation—or not—could make or break someone's reputation.

Faye stood on the stairs that led down to the ballroom where a crowd of beautiful people thronged. Gold-edged mirrors around the ballroom reflected the glittering scene a thousand times over.

She wished she could say otherwise, but she spotted Primo immediately. Hard not to when he towered above most people around him. The lights glinted off his thick head of hair, highlighting the blonder strands.

As if sensing her, he lifted his head and his eyes zeroed in on her immediately. Faye felt it like a jolt of electricity straight into her blood. It was the first time she'd seen him since Venice. Admittedly it was only a few days, but it was as if she'd left his bed only that morning, the sensations were so immediate...and the memories.

He came straight to her, walking up the stairs. He was dressed in a black tuxedo and he looked gorgeous. She sensed everyone in the vicinity hush, all eyes on them. Primo had wanted them to arrive together, but Faye had been caught up at an art auction and, because she'd had to go to her apartment to change, wouldn't have made it to meet him in time. So they'd come separately.

When he reached her she couldn't look away. Those blue eyes held her captive. He reached for her, putting an arm around her waist and pulling her into him. She found herself cleaving to him before she could resist the pull.

Then he tipped up her chin and pressed a lingering kiss to her mouth. Faye was already dissolving and melting, in spite of every pep talk she'd given herself not to allow him to have such an effect on her again. Evidently she'd been wasting her time.

He pulled back. 'Good evening,wife.'

Faye made a face and tried not to be so aware of how her breasts were crushed against his chest. 'I have a name.'

He smiled. 'Smile...everyone is watching us.'

Faye smiled dutifully.

He pulled back a little further and his gaze swept down over her body. 'You look...stunning,Faye.'

A glow of pleasure lit her up before she could stop it. But she had chosen her dress carefully. And it did please her that he'd noticed. She was used to sticking to classic shapes and colours, nothing too eye-catching, but this dress had called to the little girl inside her when she'd seen it in a window of a shop near the auction house.

Dark pink, strapless but for one garlanded strap over one shoulder. It had a ruched bodice and then fell in soft silken folds to the floor. It was whimsical. She didn't want to sayromantic, but the word whispered in her head. She'd matched it with a pearl necklace and earrings that had belonged to her mother, and her hair was twisted back into a low bun.

'Thank you,' she responded, too shy to tell Primo how gorgeous he looked. Surely he had to know?

'You didn't stay for breakfast in Venice.'

Faye's face grew hot as she remembered her fear of him waking and finding her trying to contort herself back into the dress. Flitting from his magnificent apartment as if she'd done something wrong.



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:35 am*

‘I had a meeting to get to. And a flight back to New York.’

‘I felt like a cheap one-night stand.’

Faye scoffed. ‘You’re telling me that you routinely encourage your lovers to hang out the morning after?’

He lifted his hand, where his wedding ring gleamed. ‘I’m a married man now.’

Faye couldn’t help a pulse of pleasure at this sign that he was taken. By her. He’d also neatly deflected her question.

Primo tucked her hand into his arm and said, ‘Let’s go meet the jackals, shall we?’

Faye couldn’t help her surprised huff of laughter as Primo led her down the stairs and into the crowd. It was only afterwards that she castigated herself. No doubt he’d done that on purpose, to ensure she looked suitably delighted to be on his arm. The new Mrs Holt.

After cocktails and canapés there was a lavish banquet, finished off by an auction. It included everything and anything, from the ownership of an unknown English football team to a vintage Aston Martin, last seen on screen in a world-famous spy movie.

As the auction was drawing to a raucous close Primo stood up, following others who were also starting to move to the dance floor. Faye looked up at him and felt dizzy, even though she was sitting down. He held out his hand in silent invitation.

Damn the man.

She put her hand in his. 'I'd love to.'

In the next room a band were playing smooth tunes, and Primo pulled her into his arms. He looked down at her. 'I believe this is officially our first dance.'

'And what better arena for it to play out? In front of the very people you want to impress with your newfound settled status.'

Primo made a sizzling sound. 'I want more out of this marriage than just to convince people I'm settling down.'

Faye's conscience pricked. She avoided Primo's eye, helped by the fact that he'd spun her away from him with a little flourish and then pulled her back into his arms.

She was suddenly breathless. She could feel the way his body was responding to hers. He held her close. No escape. He was looking at her as if she was the only woman in the room. It was heady. Intoxicating.

Then he asked, 'Why did you leave the other morning? And don't fob me off with your itinerary.'

Faye couldn't hide. To avoid admitting how intense it had been, she said, 'Because I'm used to my own space.'

Primo frowned. 'You've been married. I can't imagine you crept out of your first husband's bed.'

Faye had a flashback to waking up in bed alone after she'd had the operation after her miscarriage. Her husband hadn't shared breakfast with her ever again. Or her bed.

Their moments of marital bliss had been laughably brief.

She forced a smile, but it was brittle. 'It was so long ago I hardly care to remember.'

'And it's none of my business,' Primo conceded, surprising Faye. Then he said, 'What matters is the present moment, and the fact that we are married now.'

Faye felt absurdly grateful for how easily Primo was willing to let that go. And for the maturity he'd exhibited. 'Thank you.'

He swung her around to avoid colliding with another couple, and that only pressed Faye closer to his body, making her aware of the whipcord strength of every hard muscle. If she closed her eyes for a second she was transported back to Venice, and how it had felt when his body had joined hers for the first time.

Suddenly she was filled with desire—a desire to escape the hundreds of eyes watching their every move and the whispers.

Primo stopped moving and looked down at her. 'Had enough?'

This time Faye was grateful for the uncanny way he seemed to be able to read her mind.

She nodded. 'Yes.'

Primo took her hand and led her off the dance floor. They made their way to the foyer, where Faye collected her coat—a light three-quarter-length jacket matching the dress.

She was surprised that it was so late. Usually she found these events beyond tedious. But Primo hadn't been a clingy date, nor had he expected her to cling to him. He'd

been happy to conduct his own conversations. A man who was confident in himself...  
A rarity in her experience.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

As they waited for Primo's car to be brought round, Faye wondered if she should hail a cab. But Primo said, 'My driver is at your disposal, but I would like it if you accompanied me to my apartment. I seem to recall that you don't have any early engagements.'

Faye might have asked how he knew that, but at Primo's request her assistant and his now worked together to synchronise their social and work engagements. The fact that he now knew her schedule as intimately as she did was still a bit disconcerting, but then she realised that it worked both ways and smiled.

'I seem to recall that you have an early pick-up for a flight to London?'

He inclined his head. 'Indeed, but if you keep me up all night I can sleep on the plane.'

She shrugged minutely, belying the heat in her body at the excitement that gripped her at the thought of keeping him up all night. 'Why not?'

At that moment, as if on cue, Primo's driver appeared in front of them, jumping out to open the car's rear door. Faye got in, and Primo went around to the other side.

The journey to Primo's apartment didn't take long, and Faye had to concede that in practical terms it would probably make sense for her to move into Primo's apartment...but that wasn't a step she was ready to dive into.

Getting involved in the intimacy of day-to-day living would remind her far too painfully of her first marriage, and the way her husband had shut her out once she

could no longer deliver the required heir.

The thought of something similar happening with Primo made her feel a little winded for a moment—and that was what kept her cautious. He'd already impacted on her in ways she didn't want to investigate.

The car was pulling to a smooth stop now, outside a tall building bordering the park. When Faye got out Primo was there to greet her, holding out a hand. As she took it, flashes of light alerted them to the paparazzi who must have followed.

Primo cursed softly under his breath, and when they were inside he said, 'I'm sorry about that. I had no idea we were being followed.'

Faye shrugged a little. 'It's just as well I agreed to come with you—otherwise there'd be a story on Page Six tomorrow, speculating as to why we're not living together.'

They were in a private elevator now. Primo leaned back against the wall. 'That's not why I asked you to come back with me. I want to make love to you. I haven't stopped thinking about you since Venice.'

Faye's heart sped up. She hadn't stopped thinking about it either, but the elevator doors opened at that moment so she didn't have to speak.

Primo led her into a circular entrance hall. Marble floor, walls painted a light soft grey with blue tones.

'Let me take your jacket.'

Faye let it slip from her shoulders. Primo took it and put it in a small cloakroom. He led her through one doorway into a large reception room. It was bright and airy, with sumptuous couches, coffee tables. Understated tones of blue and grey. Classic.

Elegant.

Then she spotted something on one wall and gasped, walking over to stand before the massive canvas. Primo came and stood beside her, and handed her a glass of sparkling wine.

She said, 'It's a Monet. I didn't know you had one in your private collection. It's one of his Haystacks paintings.'

'You mean I could have lured you here before now with that?' Primo joked.

Faye tore her gaze from the luminously beautiful painting. 'He's one of my favourite artists.'

Primo looked at the painting. 'Mine too—although I'd say for far less knowledgeable reasons than you.'

Faye shook her head. 'It's nothing to do with knowledge. It's how it makes you feel.'

She felt her skin prickle and turned her head to find Primo watching her.

'Do you want to know how you make me feel?' he asked.

Faye's hand clutched the glass. 'Do I?'

Primo's gaze turned dark and explicit. 'Hungry.'

She was ravenous. She wanted his hands on her.

'I'm hungry too,' she admitted, although it felt as if saying that was chipping away at the walls inside her.

He smiled. ‘That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?’



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Faye didn't have time to scowl, or react, or tell Primo that actually she'd changed her mind. Because the glass of wine was taken out of her hand and she was in his arms and he was kissing her. She felt a sigh of relief mixed with pure base pleasure move through her in a shudder of longing.

He pulled back and she felt herself become weightless as Primo lifted her into his arms so that he could carry her through the apartment. Faye caught glimpses of an outdoor terrace. A gleaming kitchen. A dining room. And then they were in a corridor and Primo had kicked open a door that led into a huge bedroom with possibly the biggest bed she'd ever seen in her life.

She had an impression of dark muted colours in a simply decorated space.

He put her down and she slipped off her shoes. Hunger propelled her to start pushing Primo's jacket off his wide shoulders until he shucked it off and it fell to the ground. Then she was undoing his bow-tie and the buttons on his shirt.

He was slipping the garlanded strap of the dress down her shoulder and bending to press kisses against her skin. Faye gave up trying to take his shirt off and let him take over.

He found the zip at the back of the dress and pulled it down. He pulled the tie out of her hair so that it fell down around her shoulders and back. Then he straightened up and looked at her.

'Undress me.'

Faye needed no encouragement. She pushed aside his shirt and marvelled at the expanse of his muscular chest. She'd wondered in the last few days if maybe she'd imagined his beauty. But no. He was even more beautiful.

She pushed the shirt down over his shoulders and arms, coming close again. But Primo didn't touch her. He let her take her time, her gaze roving over his form. Hands splaying across his chest. Fingers trapping a blunt nipple.

She heard his indrawn breath and looked up, and she couldn't help smiling as she leant forward and flicked her tongue over the nub of flesh. Primo hissed. A sensitive spot. Faye made a mental note. She had a sense in that moment that a hundred years wouldn't be long enough to learn all of this man's sensitive spots, and she felt the most acute and peculiar pang of loss.

Faye pushed the notion aside, telling herself she was drunk on Primo—he was addling her brain. She put her hands to his belt and trousers, undoing them with an efficiency born of growing desperation. And then she was pushing trousers and underwear down over his hips. They fell to the floor and Primo stepped aside gracefully.

Her dress was loose around her chest, and she tugged it down until it too fell to the floor. She wasn't wearing a bra. Now all she wore was her underwear. Primo cupped her breasts in his hands and Faye shivered delicately. He rubbed her nipples with his thumbs and she had to bite her lip to stop moaning or begging.

‘What do you want, Faye?’

She moved closer, dislodging his hands, pressing her body against his, moving against him, relishing the feel of his hard body against the softness of her belly and between her legs, where she ached.

‘Touch me, Primo.’

He put his hands on her waist and together they tumbled onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, hard against soft. He moulded every curve with his hands, kissed, licked and sucked every erogenous point until she was incoherent with need.

And then he pushed her legs apart and hooked them over his shoulders. He put his mouth on her and Faye could no more keep it together than stop breathing. She cried out as wave after wave tore through her body, and then Primo entered her still clasping body with one smooth, devastating thrust and Faye was torn apart all over again.

When Faye woke, she was the one alone in the bed. She couldn’t move for long moments, her limbs heavy with a kind of satisfaction she’d never experienced before.

Before Primo.

Once again, the intensity of the physicality between them stunned her. She’d heard about sex like this, but had always believed it to be a kind of myth. People boasting.

He was obviously an experienced lover, and not remotely shy—she blushed when she thought of how he stood before her unashamedly naked—so was it uniquely him? Did all his lovers feel the same as Faye?

That thought sent a tendril of something dark through her. Jealousy. She denied it. Jealousy had no place here. In six months she would be walking away, and she would have no hold over Primo. Their time was finite. A means to an end. And if she felt bad about it then she must reassure herself that she was no less ruthless than him for marrying her solely because he’d deemed her suitable. And because he was acquiring their family business.

To that end, her father was a transformed man. He was actually getting to enjoy a retirement of sorts, now that the burden of heavy decision-making had been lifted from his shoulders.

And the burden of worrying about you, whispered a voice.

Faye groaned a little and rolled over. She buried her face in Primo's exquisite bedlinen. All four hundred million thread count, or whatever it was.

When she could move, she sat up and pulled back the covers. She had no idea when they'd finally fallen asleep. And now he was on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic.

Faye got up and washed herself in the luxurious en suite bathroom and found a robe, pulling it on and belting it.

Back in the bedroom, she studiously ignored the fact that Primo had obviously picked up the detritus of her clothes and underwear and draped them over a chair. She was tempted to look in Primo's drawers for something to wear but hesitated, feeling it was too intimate.

After a night spent in your husband's bed?mocked a voice.

She ignored it.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

She pulled the curtains back, finding French doors that led out to a terrace. She went outside in bare feet. The morning was bright and the air fresh. The streets were a long way below. From here Faye could look across Central Park. Her apartment was somewhere on the other side of the park, a block further back from this spectacular view. She'd bought her own place with her own hard-earned money and she was inordinately proud of that fact.

She went back into the bedroom and decided to explore beyond it. She heard a sound coming from the main part of the apartment and went still. Had Primo not left?

The thought that he hadn't left because he wanted to spend more time with her was sending flutters into her belly... But when she got to the doorway leading into the kitchen there was an older woman there, dressed in dark trousers and shirt, her hair in a sleek, elegant grey-haired bob.

She turned to Faye, who immediately felt naked even though she wore the robe. 'Good morning, Mrs Holt. I'm Marjorie. Mr Holt's housekeeper and general domestic dogsbody.'

Faye couldn't help but respond to the woman's warm, easy manner and outstretched hand. 'Please, call me Faye... I'm still getting used to being Mrs Holt.'

To put it mildly.

The woman smiled at her. 'You must be hungry...please come with me.'

She led Faye through to an adjoining informal dining room, where a veritable feast

had been laid out. Fresh fruit, granola, yoghurt, pastries, coffee, tea... And the daily newspapers.

‘I can do you a cooked breakfast, if you’d like?’

Faye shook her head. She wasn’t used to being waited on like this, and rarely had time for breakfast. ‘Oh, no, that won’t be necessary—but thank you.’

‘Mr Holt has organised some clothes for you—he said you’re still not fully moved in.’

Faye smiled weakly and looked at the designer bags by the door. ‘Thank you.’

Marjorie left her to eat in peace, and Faye eyed the bags suspiciously while she had some fruit and granola and yoghurt. She forced herself to have coffee before looking. The man had left at the crack of dawn—not that Faye had woken out of her pleasure-induced coma. How on earth had he organised this?

Eventually curiosity overcame her. She got up and investigated, pulling out trousers, tops, underwear, flat shoes, heeled shoes, toiletries. There was also a choice of leisure wear, and even jeans. They were simple, elegant clothes—the kind she would have chosen herself.

Faye’s mobile phone pinged from somewhere nearby and she found it in her evening bag, which had been left on a table in the hall. Her face flamed. She couldn’t even remember discarding that when they’d arrived here. Too drunk on Primo. Too desperate.

There was a text from Primo—presumably from somewhere over the Atlantic.

Good morning, I hope you slept well. I arranged some clothes for you. I have to go to

Paris from London for a cocktail function on Friday evening. It's not on the list of events for us to attend together but...they have art in Paris. P (Your husband)

Faye couldn't stop a silly smile spreading across her face. But as soon as she was aware of it she rearranged her features. Her initial reaction was, No way! They hadn't discussed it, she had prior engagements, and she couldn't just drop everything and be expected to fly across to Europe again so soon.

And yet with the lingering after-effects of Primo's very particular brand of expert lovemaking still humming in her blood, all she could see in her mind's eye was a rose-tinted view of Paris as the sun set over the Seine.

She knew that she could rearrange her schedule quite easily—the beauty of working for oneself. And he was right. They did have art in Paris. And she had clients.

She knew deep down that she'd made her decision instantly, and that it had not much at all to do with making arrangements to see clients and a lot more to do with a man who was fast becoming something of a distracting obsession.

She sent back a quick text.

Thanks for the clothes, that was thoughtful. I will see if I can rearrange some work engagements. F (Your wife)

Before she could delete the cutesy copycat your wife, she sent the text and threw the phone down.

Her insides were somersaulting like a teenager's. Ugh. This had so not been the plan when she'd signed up to this marriage.

## CHAPTER SIX

## Paris

‘ISTHEREA better time to be in Paris than in the spring?’ The woman beside Primo at the cocktail party gave a slightly annoying laugh. ‘I know it’s such a cliché, but isn’t Paris just so beautiful?’

Primo wasn’t and hadn’t ever been unaware of Paris’s beauty, but to his shame he’d always taken it for granted. Today, for the first time ever, he’d had a little time after a lunch meeting and had taken a walk back to the hotel along the Seine. And he had noticed the trees in blossom, the people strolling along with dogs or just eating lunch.

He’d noticed lovers too, locked in passionate embraces. And that had made him think of Faye. And how, since the other night in Manhattan, he hadn’t been able to get their passionate embraces out of his head.



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In bed, she was everything that he'd thought she would be and more. Under that serene and elegant surface was an earthy, sensual woman whose appetites matched his. It was a little unexpected to find that he was married to the best lover he'd ever had. The most he'd hoped for was that they'd be compatible. What they actually were was combustible.

It would fade, Primo had told himself that afternoon, as he'd sat down for a few minutes and ordered an espresso from a riverside café. As if the coffee might help to burn away some of the anticipation he felt because he knew that Faye was coming to Paris to meet him.

Strange that it had felt like such a victory when she'd texted earlier.

I've managed to rearrange some of my meetings. I'll see you at the event. F

He'd been in an early meeting in London and he'd felt like a teenager whose crush had just agreed to go out with him.

Ridiculous.

He only realised he was scowling now when the 'Isn't Paris just so beautiful?' woman beside him looked a little alarmed.

He rearranged his facial expression and said, 'You are right. It is absolutely the most beautiful city in the springtime. Now, if you'll excuse me, please?'

He'd turned to walk away, and was just thinking to himself Where the hell is

she?when the little hairs went up on the back of his neck.

He looked up the stairs that led down into the room where the party was being held. Faye was standing at the top in a flowing black knee-length cocktail dress. Sleeveless. So far so classic. But it had a deep vee that cut between her breasts, and when she moved the dress shone and sparkled from the intricately beaded lace overlay.

She wore vertiginous high heels, and Primo couldn't take his eyes off her as she came down the stairs, her legs long and shapely. Deep within him he felt a very primal beat saying, Mine, mine, mine.

He walked to the bottom of the stairs to meet her. Standing on the bottom step, she was at a slightly higher level than him, and Primo gave in to temptation and kissed her. He felt her quickly indrawn breath and then, within a beat, her mouth had softened under his. If not for the crowded room behind him, he would have been hauling her closer and indulging in seeing how easy it would be to slide a hand under one side of her dress to cup a breast.

He drew back reluctantly. She blinked at him. Her hair was pulled back, sleek. In a low ponytail. She wore minimal jewellery, but he could see the engagement and wedding rings in his peripheral vision, and he was filled with such a strong sense of satisfaction that it was a little disconcerting.

He said, 'Thank you for coming. You look stunning.'

She suddenly looked a little shy, with an expression he hadn't noticed before because usually she was so confident. It made him think of how she could often appear a little shy before they started making love, but then she'd be all heat and fire and—

'Thank you. You look...lovely too.'

Primo felt a burgeoning sense of something very light and expansive filling his chest. He tucked Faye's arm into his and led her into the room. 'So, can I take it that you decided to join me because you missed me?'

'Not quite,' was her dry response.

Primo let her go to take two glasses of sparkling wine from a waiter and handed her one. 'Santé.'

She arched a brow. 'You speak French?'

'Mais, bien sûr. I also speak Spanish, Italian, German and passable Mandarin.'

Faye looked a little smug. 'Me too. I also speak Arabic and passable Farsi. I did a few months' study of Persian Art in Iran a few years ago.'

Primo bowed his head. 'I defer to your superior linguistic abilities. So, tell me, what on earth else could have tempted you to come to Paris if it wasn't your insanely handsome and virile husband?'

Faye's face went pink. Primo realised he enjoyed getting under her skin by teasing her.

'I've arranged to visit the newly reopened Conti Art Gallery.'

'That's Modern Art, right?'

Faye nodded. 'Very good.'

'When are you going?'

‘Tomorrow—early, before they open. A client has done me a favour in organising a private tour.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

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Faye looked a little surprised. ‘Are you interested in Modern Art?’

‘Not especially, but I’m sure you can make it interesting.’

Faye cocked her head to one side. ‘Do you know how much I charge for a personal appointment?’

Primo smiled. He really enjoyed this woman and her determination to cling on to her independence. She surprised him—and it had been a long time since he’d been surprised. He had no doubt that once she’d made her point about retaining her independence inevitably their lives would dovetail more. But for now he was enjoying the novelty.

He said, ‘I’m sure I can make it up to you in kind.’

She went a little pink again. She opened her mouth, but before she could say something that he already knew would be tart they were interrupted by the host of the party.

‘Primo, this must be your beautiful new bride! Please introduce us.’

Primo bit back a smile at Faye’s thwarted expression and took her hand in his as he faced their host.

Faye didn’t like how nice it felt to have Primo touch her back or take her hand. It was as if when they were in close proximity he couldn’t not touch her, and she had to admit she felt the same. But she’d never have the nerve to claim him physically the way he

did her.

It brought back painful memories of her first marriage. She was naturally a tactile person and, believing that she and her husband were both on the same page emotionally, she'd felt comfortable enough to touch him in public. Just little gestures...a hand on his back or, when sitting down, on his thigh...

But invariably he would tense and move away a little, and say to her, *sotto voce*, 'Not here, Faye.'

She'd learnt to curb her natural impulses, and since then no lover had enticed her to experiment again. But Primo did. And yet the thought of reaching for his hand and having him turn to look at her as if she was doing something wrong kept her impulse in check.

Dusk was falling over Paris, and outside the Eiffel Tower was twinkling in the distance. Faye was coming back from the bathroom and saw Primo was deep in conversation with a man. For a moment she was arrested by his sheer good looks and formidable build. He was dressed in a dark blue suit and a light blue shirt, open at the neck. Impossibly suave.

She hadn't really been breathing properly since she'd arrived and caught his eye, and he'd come to the stairs to meet her. She saw the open French doors and diverted to an outdoor terrace, relishing the thought of a moment to get some air and try and sort through all the tangled things Primo made her feel.

Chief of which was the ever-present humming desire.

She came within ten feet of the guy and it was as if an electrical switch had been turned on.

She was tingling all over at the thought of what the night would hold. Her assistant had told her that Primo had a suite booked here, at the hotel where the party was taking place, so she'd booked a room too.

She knew Primo would expect her to share with him, but there was a part of her that still resisted giving herself over completely to this arrangement.

Because you know it won't last.

She reassured herself that it wasn't as if Primo had been under any illusions that she'd married him with unabated enthusiasm. They both knew it was an ancillary deal alongside a much bigger one.

And he knew that she might decide to leave after six months. There was no guarantee she would stay. And if she kept her boundaries during that time then he couldn't say she'd deceived him.

Simple. And yet...not.

It felt as if every time she was with him he had a stronger pull on her.

She shouldn't have come to Paris. They had a function to attend together in Boston at the end of the following week. That would have been time enough for them to meet again. But Faye had given in to an impulse too strong to ignore...

'Here you are.'

A shiver of longing went down Faye's spine and directly into her gut at the sound of Primo's voice. She closed her eyes for a second, and then opened them as he came to stand beside her, facing her, one elbow resting on the wall of the terrace. Like this, his mouth was on the same level as hers, and all Faye would have to do would be to

lean forward and—

He reached out and touched her jaw with a finger. ‘You look very stern.’

Faye relaxed her facial expression, felt her skin tingle where Primo had touched her. ‘I was admiring the view.’

Liar.

She found herself divulging, ‘I spent a summer here as an au pair, between school and college.’



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Primo looked at her. 'That's impressive. Why weren't you swanning around the Mediterranean on a yacht, presumably like the rest of your peers? You could have had an easier summer.'

Faye shrugged again. She felt pricklingly self-conscious under Primo's blue gaze. 'I was never into that kind of vacuous social life. And I didn't mind working.'

'Your independence means a lot to you,' he observed.

'I was an only child. I think I learnt from a young age to be comfortable on my own.'

Until she'd lost herself in her first marriage, believing herself to be in love.

Primo looked at her. 'You're not on your own now. I'm here.'

Faye's heart thumped unsteadily at the gleam in his eyes. 'I guess so.'

He arched a brow and moved closer, until there was no space between their bodies. 'Do you doubt it? Should I show you how real I am?'

In her head Faye said, Please... But all she could manage was a kind of pleading sound. No words.

Primo stood up straight and cupped her jaw and face with both hands. Something inside Faye melted. Relaxed. She spent so much time in her head that she was fast becoming addicted to the way Primo could silence everything with his touch.

His mouth covered hers, stealing her breath, and she was lost. The party just feet away was forgotten. The kiss started out chaste enough—as if Primo had intended it to be just a perfunctory thing—but neither broke contact, and then it became something far more incendiary and explicit.

His hands had moved down to her waist and he was pulling her closer, so she could feel the evidence of his arousal through their clothes. Faye moved her hips enticingly.

Primo pulled back and said in a rough voice, ‘Witch.’

He lifted a hand and cupped her jaw again. Faye wanted to lean into his hand and purr like a cat.

‘I think I’ve had enough of this party. You?’ he asked.

Faye nodded.

Primo took her hand and led her back into the thronged room. They went to the host and said goodbye.

Outside the party, Primo still had Faye’s hand in his. He lifted it and pressed a kiss to it, causing Faye to suck in a sharp breath. His easy tactility and affection were fast becoming addictive.

‘Fancy a nightcap in my room? I presume you’ve booked your own room in the hotel?’

Faye nodded, almost feeling guilty now. But Primo said nothing. He just led them to an elevator.

It ascended to the very top level of the hotel. Naturally he had a penthouse suite that

appeared to Faye to run across the entirety of the top floor, with views even more impressive than those a few floors below.

‘What would you like?’ Primo asked.

Faye looked across the room. He’d taken off his jacket, and his back and shoulders looked very broad.

Faye took off her shoes and sank down into a plush chair. ‘A small white wine, please.’

Primo poured the drinks and came back over. He handed Faye hers and sat down at right angles to her chair. Faye tucked her legs under her. Primo’s gaze dropped to her chest, and Faye looked down and realised the dress was gaping open slightly over one breast. Her skin prickled with awareness. She could have pulled it back over, to cover herself, but she left it.

Primo looked back up at her face. The air between them sizzled, but she tried to feign nonchalance. ‘You don’t have an apartment in Paris?’

Primo shook his head. ‘My father does, but I don’t use it. We had a lot more properties, but I sold most of them off...just keeping a few strategic ones.’

‘My apartment in Manhattan is the only property I own. We had more, but Father sold them off after Mother died. He didn’t see the point in travelling much after she was gone.’

‘He really loved her?’

Faye nodded, feeling a little emotional. She took a sip of wine to disguise it.

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Primo was shaking his head. 'I can't imagine what it must be like to have two parents who aren't permanently at each other's throats. My parents' marriage was one of two states: either ice-cold, with tension thick enough to cut with a knife, or dramatic histrionics. The morning our mother left,' Primo went on, 'Quin was clinging to her, crying and begging her not to go. But I was numb. I had to peel him off her. To this day I can't stand dramatics.'

Feeling a little less exposed after hearing this, Faye said, 'That's a form of self-protection. Your brother acted out his anguish, but you pushed yours down.'

Primo arched a brow. 'Was psychology part of your art degree?'

But his words held no edge or defensiveness. Faye wondered what it would take to really ruffle the surface of this very self-contained man.

At that moment his gaze dropped again to her chest. His jaw tightened.

Feeling emboldened, Faye asked, 'Is something bothering you?'

His gaze came back up. His eyes were glittering. 'You know exactly what you're doing.'

She didn't, actually, but it felt heady to finally see some evidence that she could ruffle Primo's feathers—even a little bit. She looked down and could see the curve of her breast. She pulled her dress apart a little bit more, exposing herself, and then very deliberately tipped her glass of wine so that the cold liquid fell on her breast, running in a rivulet around and over her nipple.

‘Oops.’

‘Faye...’

She looked up. Primo’s face was stark. He’d put his drink down and his hands were on the arms of the chair, knuckles white.

‘Come here,’ he ordered softly.

Faye felt like saying, You come here, because she wasn’t sure her legs would work when she stood up. But she found herself untucking her legs and obeying his order, until she was standing in front of him, her glass in her hand.

‘Give me your glass.’

She handed it over and he put it on a side table. Then he looked at her and leaned forward, putting his hands on her waist and drawing her to him, so that she had to put her knees on the chair either side of his thighs.

Her hands went to his chest and she could feel the strong thud of his heart. Faye’s own heart was palpitating.

Primo reached up and slid his hands under the wide straps of the dress. ‘May I?’ he said.

She was sitting on the man’s lap, legs spread wide. She nodded, and bit her lip as he pushed the material down her arms, making the dress fall to her waist, exposing her bare breasts.

Faye lifted her arms from the straps.

Primo lifted the wine glass from the table and held it to Faye's hot skin, making her nipples pebble into tight buds of need. Then he slowly and deliberately poured more wine, first over one breast and then the other, before putting the glass back down. Then he cupped her breasts in his hands and proceeded to very thoroughly lick them clean of all traces of wine, lingering on her nipples, sucking and tugging on the sensitised flesh, until Faye was unconsciously moving her hips against him to assuage the ache.

As if reading her mind, Primo kept his mouth on her as one hand delved under the skirt of her dress and found her lace underwear, pushing it aside so that he could explore her flesh, finding where she was hot and moist, delving deep inside with first one and then two fingers.

Faye was feverish now as, with his tongue and mouth and wicked fingers, he brought her to a shuddering orgasm. She looked down at him, stunned, as her body shuddered with voluptuous aftershocks. But she was still hungry. And she could feel every muscle in his body was taut.

She lifted herself up and stood on shaky legs. She pulled her underwear off completely and then positioned herself over Primo again. She undid his shirt and pushed it open, spreading her hands and fingers across his chest. And then she reached down and undid his belt buckle and button.

He said with half a smile in his voice, 'We could go somewhere more comfortable...'

Faye shook her head. 'No, here. Now...'

While she was undoing him, finding his length and putting her hand around him, he was reaching for her hair and unpinning it so that it fell around her shoulders.

She came up on her knees, either side of his thighs, and he put his hands on her

buttocks, squeezing the flesh as she slowly and carefully moved down onto his hard length.

They both sucked in a breath as her body took him in and sensitised muscles moulded around his flesh. For a moment Faye didn't move, too full of something that felt almost...emotional as she looked into his eyes.

And then, terrified of what that meant, she started to move, up and down, making Primo's jaw clench. Their skin grew slick with perspiration and his hands squeezed harder, urging her on, allowing her to move but then holding her still so that he could surge up and into her. And all she could do was cling to his shoulders and bite back a low moan of pleasure.

This orgasm came less quickly than the last one, but it was no less devastating—like a massive body of water that kept surging and surging until it broke against her, her body clamping down on Primo's until he too found release, holding her still as he thrust up, touching her so deeply that she couldn't breathe for a long moment, and then fell, limp against him, her face buried in his neck.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Faye wasn't sure how or when they were able to move, but somehow, at some point, Primo was lifting her to his chest and walking them through the suite into a bedroom.

He put her down on the end of the bed and said, 'Wait there.'

Faye didn't have the strength to tell him she wasn't even sure if she could speak, never mind move. She was vaguely aware of her deshabelle. Dress bunched up to her waist. Underwear gone. Breasts completely exposed. Hair down. Make-up...? Smeared into oblivion. But somehow she couldn't care less. She'd never felt so relaxed with a lover. When she was with Primo like this, boundaries dissolved and melted into nothing.

He came back and she realised he'd taken off his rumpled clothes. He pulled her up and led her into the bathroom, which was already steaming up from the shower. He pulled her dress down and then brought her into the shower, where he proceeded to wash her with thorough efficiency.

Even though she could barely move, she could already feel the flickers of a resurgence of desire as his hands moved over her backside and around to the front, dipping down briefly to that tender spot between her legs.

Sleepily she protested, 'I can wash myself...'

'Done.'

He turned the water off and wrapped her in a big soft towel. He'd pulled her hair up, twisting it into a knot to keep it dry. He let it down now. He briskly dried himself and



then led her into the bedroom, to the bed.

Faye crawled into it and landed on her back. Primo lay beside her. She turned her head to look at him and saw he was watching her. She opened her mouth to say something... But she was asleep before she could articulate anything, her last image of Primo's bright blue eyes on her.

When Faye woke she felt so utterly heavy and at peace that she relished the feeling for a few moments—before snippets of the previous night came back to her. She was in Paris. As if to remind her of that, the very distinctive sound of a French police siren came faintly from the street far down below.

She opened her eyes. The bed beside her was rumpled, but empty. She breathed out. There were no sounds coming from the bathroom. Faye sat up and realised she was still in the towel from taking that shower. After the most torrid and urgent sex she could remember having.

She groaned. She was pretty sure Primo wasn't used to waking up with lovers still wearing a towel and with their hair all over the place.

She went into the bathroom and pulled on a voluminous robe. She found copious lavish beauty products. And a new toothbrush still in its packaging. Faye freshened up and pulled her hair back, and steeled herself to see Primo.

On bare feet—because of course she had nothing of her own with her in his suite—she padded through the generous rooms until she came to the main reception room. The French doors were open onto the terrace and curtains moved softly in the spring breeze. Faye heard deep voices and then a man appeared in a hotel uniform.

He bowed towards her. 'Good morning, Mrs Holt. Breakfast is served on the terrace.'

Faye mumbled something in return and went out to find Primo sitting at a laid table, dressed and shaved and not looking as if he'd unravelled her completely last night. She felt exposed.

He looked at her, an expression of something close to amusement on his face which didn't help her mood.

'Good morning. Don't worry—it's still early. You won't have missed your appointment.'

The appointment!

She'd forgotten. Not like her at all. The man was scrambling her brain. She felt on edge and prickly.

She sat down on the opposite side of the table. Coffee. She needed coffee.

As if reading her mind—because why not? He could read her body better than she could—Primo picked up the pot.

'Coffee?'

Faye held out her cup. She knew she was being ridiculous, but this was exactly why she'd pushed so hard to have boundaries between her and Primo—to avoid this kind of cosy domestic scene. For her it brought back too many painful memories of breakfasting on her own once her previous husband had decided she was no longer a viable wife.

'Thank you,' she said, as graciously as she could, and took a sip of the strong hot drink.

‘Not a morning person?’

She looked at him and felt her irritation sapping away. She was being ridiculous. ‘I guess I’m just used to my own space.’

‘You don’t like to hang out with lovers the morning after?’

Faye shuddered lightly. ‘Not generally, no.’ She looked at him over the rim of her cup. ‘You?’

His mouth firmed a little. ‘I’ve tended to avoid it, as it can signify a desire for an intimacy that I’m not interested in.’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He looked at her again.

‘But this is different...we’re married.’ Primo gestured to the table full of fruit and tempting pastries. ‘Look at us, having our first breakfast together. Cute.’

There was only the slightest hint of mockery in Primo’s voice.

Faye desisted from making a face, or saying, Don’t get used to it. But she wanted to turn the spotlight on him and asked, as she picked up again au chocolat, ‘Based on what you told me about your thoughts on marriage and romance, I’m assuming you’ve never been in love?’

Primo took a sip of his own coffee. He shook his head. ‘No. I don’t believe in it. I think people form attachments...have things in common. They like to call it love as a justification for staying together, for choosing one person.’

He looked at her.

‘You have been in love.’

## CHAPTER SEVEN

FAYEFELTPANICKY. How did he know? What had she told him about her husband?

‘I never told you that.’

‘No,’ he agreed. ‘But your first marriage wounded you more than just on the surface. You were hurt.’

Faye avoided his eyes and picked at the pastry. Eventually she admitted, ‘I thought I was in love with him, but I was just naive.’

‘You were young, and you had a good example from your parents. Why wouldn’t you have hoped for a successful relationship built on more than just strategy after seeing that?’

Faye looked at him. Sometimes she felt a lot older than her years, having gone through a marriage and a divorce and the trauma of becoming infertile. But here with Primo and his non-judgemental acceptance she felt lighter. Somehow...younger again. As if there were still possibilities.

She shook her head at the fanciful notion. Good sex. That was all it was. Addling her brain.

‘Maybe,’ she conceded, and put some of the pastry in her mouth in case she asked any more leading questions.

It didn’t surprise her that he hadn’t been in love, but she didn’t like to admit that she felt a sense of relief. It disturbed her—the thought of someone being able to crack this man’s generally serene exterior.

They managed to eat and finish their coffee companionably enough, but then Faye realised something. ‘My clothes are all in my room, on another floor.’

Primo said, ‘I’ve arranged for the butler to gain access to your room and bring over some things so you can dress.’

Once again he was demonstrating an easy and generous courtesy. It made something swoop dangerously inside her. Chipping away at her defences. Faye felt churlish for insisting on maintaining her own space, but after last night, and how easily he could make her lose herself, it was more important than ever.

She stood up. 'Thank you for doing that.'

'They're in the guest room.'

'I'll go back to my room before we head out, if that's okay? Meet you in the lobby in about twenty minutes?'

'Sounds good.'

Primo waited for Faye in the lobby. For the first time in a long time he was taking his foot off the unrelenting accelerator.

You mean the first time ever, prompted a little voice.

And it had happened without him really making a conscious decision. A little unsettling to realise now, even if Primo knew that everything was in good hands.

He'd handed over the responsibility for ensuring the smooth transition of absorbing MacKenzie Enterprises into Holt Industries. He knew Faye's father would be watching everything carefully, and he did trust his man. But still, for someone who had taken up his role as heir to his father and devoted his every waking moment to it for the better part of the last two decades, it was only now he was appreciating the extent to which he'd abdicated his responsibilities. For a woman. When no woman before had inspired any desire to spend more time with her than necessary.

This is different. You're married. You have to spend time together.

Primo shook his head at himself. He was being ridiculous. This wastotally different. He was married to Faye. He had to get to know her. Surely this was to be expected of a marriage? A shifting of priorities into the more personal sphere?

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He slipped sunglasses over his eyes. He couldn't deny that he was finding the chase aspect of their relationship...entertaining. And he really didn't think she was doing it for the thrill. His instinct all along about her had been that she didn't play games. But that unsettling realisation that he'd been acting without thinking lingered, making him feel a sense of exposure.

Asking her to come to Paris... Deviating from the schedule...Enjoying her company in a way that he hadn't expected.

She might turn to fire in his arms at night, but she was keeping him at arm's length by day—exactly as she'd laid out in their agreement. He told himself that that was what he wanted too. It wasn't as if he hoped for a more emotionally intimate relationship. But some emotional intimacy was unavoidable and necessary in order to cultivate a long-term union.

Clearly, she didn't fully trust him, and for them to have a successful marriage that would have to change. So he was just doing what he could to foster that trust.

Ultimately, what remained most important to Primo was protecting his family legacy and name. Consolidating the success and wealth he'd already achieved. Faye was just the next step in that process—taking him and Holt Industries to the next level.

At that moment, the tiny hairs went up on the back of his neck and he turned to see Faye walking towards him as if conjured out of his thoughts. She was dressed casually, in loose trousers and a short-sleeved fitted jumper that drew the eye to her small waist and perfectly shaped breasts. Flat shoes. Perfect for the Paris streets. Hair loose around her shoulders. A crossbody bag with an iconic designer logo on the



clasp.

She oozed class and elegance. But after getting to know her—as much as she would allow—he knew of the passion beneath the surface. And the spikiness that he suspected she hid from most people.

He liked it. Like the way her nipples felt against his tongue. Sharp...

She stopped before him. ‘What are you smiling at?’

He took her elbow to guide her out of the hotel. ‘Nothing...nothing at all.’

He was doing the right thing—investing time in his wife. After all, now she was as much a part of the future of Holt Industries as he was, and any sense of exposure he’d been feeling dissolved as they walked into the early-morning beauty of Paris.

When the six months was up she would have forgotten all about reviewing their marriage. She would trust him enough to jettison those terms and they would be a solid, successful unit.

They’d finished their tour with the gallery director and Faye was lingering in front of a painting that had transfixed her. People were trickling in now—the first visitors of the day.

‘You like that painting,’ Primo commented from beside her.

Faye tore her gaze away from the swirling abstract in vivid reds and pinks. ‘Lara Lopez. She’s a Portuguese artist. Up and coming. She’s becoming a name, and some clients have started collecting her work.’

Primo looked at the description plate. ‘It’s called *Life*, and donated by the artist.’

‘It’s a big coup to have your work displayed among some of the century’s greatest modern artists.’

Faye felt a little exposed at the way something about the painting called to her so viscerally.

Primo said, ‘That doesn’t explain why you like it so much.’

Now Faye felt really exposed. ‘I’m not sure...maybe the colours.’

‘I think it’s because it’s like you.’

Faye looked at Primo sharply. ‘What does that mean?’

‘On the surface you’re all cool and refined, but under the surface you burn—and you have a passion for life that I think you are afraid to show people.’

Faye’s mouth dropped open, but she quickly shut it again and said, a little testily, ‘Didyou do a degree in psychology?’

Primo smiled easily. ‘Nope, completely self-taught.’

Faye made a sound like harrumph. The truth was that Primo’s assessment was scarily accurate. There was something about the painting that called to her because she felt its passion. Its hunger for life. All the things she was afraid of since failing at her first marriage and then becoming infertile.

She moved away and looked at her watch.

‘Somewhere else to be?’ he asked.

She glanced at Primo. He was too distracting. Dressed in casual trousers and a dark navy polo shirt that seemed to make his eyes pop even more. She'd been ultra-aware of him as the director had led them around the museum on a whistlestop tour.

She felt a little churlishly like asking, Don't you? Because he seemed all too happy to wander around and take in the sights. It unnerved her, because she hadn't factored in spending time with him like this.

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Even so, she felt almost guilty when she said, 'I'm actually going to Dublin for the night. There's a dinner in Dublin Castle to celebrate some of Ireland's biggest living artists as part of their annual culture week.'

Primo frowned. 'That wasn't in the diary.'

'No, because I thought I couldn't go. But since I'm in Paris, and it's less than a couple of hours' flight, I told them I could make it after all.'

His gaze narrowed on her for a moment, and then he said, 'That sounds like an interesting evening.'

Faye almost had the urge to say something crazy like, 'Do you want to come?'

But he was looking at his watch and saying, 'I should get back to the hotel. I have one more meeting before I head back to New York. I have meetings there tomorrow.'

'Of course. I need to get back and pack too.'

She was glad she hadn't blurted out the invitation. That would really have been muddying the waters.

Primo said, 'I'm glad you came to Paris... You know, Faye, I'd like to get to know you better. I think we can really enjoy ourselves in this marriage if you give it a chance.'

Faye felt all at once gently chastened, guilty, and something far less identifiable. 'I...

Okay.'

'You can smile too, if you want. Your face won't crack, I swear.'

It suddenly struck her to wonder when she'd started to hold herself so rigidly. After her divorce?

She forced herself to take a breath and smiled.

Primo shook his head. 'One day, Faye MacKenzie, you'll smile for real.'

Dublin

'One day...you'll smile for real.'

The words were still reverberating in Faye's head later that evening as she was guided to her dinner seat in Dublin Castle's magnificent and historic St Patrick's Hall. There had been a drinks reception in the Portrait Gallery before the gala dinner, and Faye had met with some of Ireland's biggest artists.

Usually an event like this would consume all her energy, as she would be thinking of people she could link the artists up with—galleries or clients—but this evening she was distracted.

Why did Primo care if she smiled for real? Why couldn't he just accept the status quo, with them appearing together when necessary and spending the night together when it was convenient?

Although, that didn't quite capture the heat and intensity of their chemistry. It wasn't so much spending the night together as mutually combusting and passing out in a pleasure-induced coma.

Faye looked around her now and a sense of isolation struck her. Like at the Venice Carnival Ball, it seemed that everyone was paired off and chatting animatedly.

She was wearing a green silk evening gown, cut on the bias and low on the chest, with small capped sleeves. Flowing and romantic. She'd spotted it in a boutique window before leaving Paris and now, as she sat here, she realised she'd bought it because she'd imagined Primo seeing her in it and wanting her.

Now she felt silly. It was too whimsical and exposing—physically and emotionally.

Damn Primo Holt for making her behave like a teenager with a crush. And for making her more aware of her isolation and also of how tightly wound she was. She took a deep breath in a bid to force herself to relax. She took another sip of her sparkling wine that she'd carried into the dining room with her—and then promptly nearly spat it out again when she saw the object of her fevered thoughts being directed to the table where she sat and the empty chair beside her.

She couldn't quite believe it, but the somersaulting sensation in her belly told her he was real. And his scent. Crisp and spicy and earthy.

He was wearing a classic black tuxedo and smiling benignly at her, 'Hi.'

Then he looked down at her dress and back up. There was very explicit heat in his eyes.

'You look...amazing.'

Her wish was fulfilled. As if a fairy godmother had heard her thoughts.

There were a million and one reasons why Faye should be prickling at the sight of Primo so improbably here, in Dublin. But the last few moments of self-recrimination

had dissolved, replaced by instant pure desire, and Faye was revelling in the very obvious desire in his gaze. Exactly as she'd fantasised.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

The truth was she was happy to see him, and she was too surprised to fight it.

‘Do you get a kick out of surprising people?’ she asked.

Primo took a sip of the wine a waiter had just poured for him. ‘Can’t say that anyone has ever inspired me to want to surprise them before...it’s uniquely you.’

She shook her head. ‘How did you even—?’

‘Once the organisers knew that I was your husband they were aghast that I hadn’t been included in the invitation, and were only too happy to accommodate me at short notice.’

‘What about your meetings in New York?’

‘Moved them. Quite easy to do when you’re the owner and CEO of the company.’

Everyone else around them faded away. Faye felt something inside her weaken. Maybe it would be okay to indulge in this...this crazy honeymoon period, or whatever it was, between them. She felt something bubbling up inside her—a lightness she couldn’t repress. And then a smile broke across her face at the fact that Primo had come all the way to Dublin to surprise her.

Primo drew back, as if shocked, and put a hand to his chest. ‘Could that really be a smile?’

Faye made a face then, and picked up a small bread roll as if to throw it at him. But



her smile didn't fade.

After the lavish dinner, Faye and Primo walked the short distance from Dublin Castle back to her hotel on the banks of the River Liffey. He held her hand and she shamelessly luxuriated in the tactility that she was beginning to trust more and more.

She pushed away the voices warning her to be careful.

Dublin was a young, vibrant city, and people spilled out of bars and cafés enjoying the unseasonably warm spring weather.

A few people stopped and did a double-take at seeing Primo in his tuxedo, and Faye couldn't blame them. He'd opened his bow-tie and the top button of his shirt, and he looked as if he might have stepped off the cover of a book, with his dark golden hair and near-perfect features.

They passed a buzzing gay bar and Faye heard one man say to another sorrowfully, 'All the gorgeous ones are straight.'

She couldn't hold back a small laugh.

Primo said, 'Careful, if the wind changes you might stay like that.'

Still smiling, Faye said, 'My wee Scottish granny used to say that. Except she was a long way from her actual Scottish roots.'

'Do you ever go back there?'

She shook her head. 'No, we really have no links to the place any more—apart from family stories and some very distant relatives. Although I did manage to do a semester at Edinburgh University, which I adored.'

They were at the hotel now, and Primo picked up the key. One key.

Faye looked at him and he said, 'I upgraded you—us—to the penthouse suite.'

She guessed Mark, her assistant, must have told Primo where she was staying. She had half a mind to resist Primo's all too magnetic pull, but that would have taken a strength she couldn't currently muster.

'Okay.'

They took the elevator to the top floor, its doors opening into a corridor with a room at the end. The suite was spacious, and decorated with lots of wood and elegant soft furnishings. A balcony ran along the outside of the living space, overlooking the river.

Faye heard the sound of a cork popping and watched Primo pour two glasses of champagne, bringing one to her where she stood on the balcony.

'Thank you,' she murmured, still a little overwhelmed that he was here. She said, 'You didn't have to come all the way here. We'll both be back in Manhattan next week. We have that function in Boston.'

Primo rested on an elbow beside her and looked at her. 'You don't get it, do you? I want you, Faye... I haven't wanted anyone like this in a long time. I find you exciting—and that doesn't happen very often for me either. The fact that we're married... I'd still want you even if we weren't.'

'You're saying this could have been just an affair?' Faye said, almost hopefully.

Primo shook his head. 'I'm glad it's not. I think marrying you is one of the smartest things I've done in a long time.'

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Faye desperately tried to resist the spell he was weaving around her, making her think all sorts of things. She gestured at the invisible electricity between them. 'But this won't last...it never does.'

He didn't disagree with her. 'And then we'll still have enough to make a very successful marriage.'

'You don't like to fail, do you?' Faye observed.

He smiled, and it was a shark's smile. 'Not an option.'

She shivered slightly. She wondered what it must be like to be on the other side of this man's charm and interest. If you crossed him...

Like you, you mean? When you have every intention of walking away after six months? Not revealing the truth of your infertility?

Faye desperately reassured herself that she'd made it very clear what her terms were and couldn't be accused of deception.

To stop thinking about that, she leaned forward and kissed him, pressing her mouth to his, revelling in the firmness of his lips. For a moment he let her kiss him, and then he reached for her with his free arm and pulled her into him, taking control of the kiss and showing her that any sense of control she might have had was just an illusion.

The wine glasses were put down and that electricity crackled in the air around them as they blindly made their way to the bedroom, shedding and divesting themselves of

clothes as they went.

Faye vaguely wondered if it had been less than twenty-four hours since she'd slept with him. It felt like years ago. She was desperate, hungry, reaching for Primo as soon as he was naked, putting her hand around him and hearing his sharp intake of breath.

She was naked too, and Primo cupped her breasts, feeding her tingling flesh into his mouth, making her moan softly with need. She took her hand off him and moved under him, spreading her legs around him, and Primo needed no further enticement to join their bodies in one deep thrust.

Faye's head was thrown back as pleasure climbed inexorably through her body, tightening every nerve-ending until she was held on the brink of shimmering ecstasy. But Primo wouldn't release her.

She looked at him, and his eyes were on her. She had nowhere to hide. Bared utterly. And yet she couldn't look away.

'Please... Primo...'

His face was flushed, a lock of hair falling onto his forehead. He was in her, and around her, and they were one in a way that she knew terrified her. But she couldn't unpack that now. When he reached down between their bodies, touched her where they were joined, he finally released her from the exquisite tension and they both fell over the edge and into pleasure so intense it almost hurt.

When Faye woke she was alone in the bed, like the previous morning in Paris, her body heavy with a bone-deep sense of satisfaction and her mind full of snapshots of the previous night. It had been as raw and elemental as the first few times and it didn't look to be waning any time soon.

He'd followed her to Dublin.

The lightness she'd felt on seeing him yesterday evening lingered. It was an unusual sensation for Faye, who'd got used to barricading herself behind protective walls since her first marriage.

She rolled over and buried her head in the pillow, letting out a groan of embarrassment but also feeling a fizzing kind of joy.

A tap on her bare shoulder made her go very still. She dug her face out of the pillow and squinted at Primo, standing by the bed in a robe, holding a coffee cup. She was very dishevelled and naked. She pulled up the sheet, feeling shy, which was ridiculous.

'Morning,' Primo said cheerfully, putting the cup down near the bed. 'Coffee. I seem to recall it having a positive effect.'

Faye might have scowled at him, but her face didn't seem able to arrange itself into that expression. She leaned over and picked up the cup, taking a sip. The coffee had an almost instantaneous effect, waking her out of the dreamy state she'd been in. Good.

She put the cup back down and looked at Primo. 'Don't you have meetings in New York?'

'I pushed them again. I'm extending our trip—if you can rearrange your schedule. We'll be back in America in time for the Boston event.'

Her mouth dropped open in shock at this pronouncement. When she'd recovered, she asked, 'And in the meantime we'll be...?'

Primo sat down on the edge of the bed and placed his hands either side of her. 'Enjoying a honeymoon—which I believe is a normal event for most newly married couples.'

Faye gulped. 'I thought we weren't most married couples, though.'

The sizzle in the air between them made a lie of Faye's words. Primo confirmed it when he said, 'On the contrary, I think we're proving to be no different to most newlyweds, and if anything it would serve us well to indulge this...phase.'

'Phase...?'

Primo very deliberately pulled the sheet down, exposing Faye's chest. His hungry gaze moved from her mouth to her breasts and back up. Instantly she was wide awake and burning inside.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He bent forward and pressed his mouth to the upper slope of one breast. Faye sank back against the pillows. Maybe Primo was right. Maybe if they did indulge in this...phase, it would burn out quickly and some kind of sanity might return. And then she could remember what this was supposed to be about. A means to an end.

Six months of marriage to ensure her family's legacy would be protected and secured for the long term.

Six months to indulge in this man, who was slowly but surely rewiring her brain to demand a level of pleasure that was truly unprecedented.

She reached for his robe and pushed it off his shoulders. Primo pulled back and shrugged it off, and then he was naked, his skin gleaming with dark golden perfection.

He whipped away the sheet completely, but before he touched her again he said, 'So, do you think you can rearrange your schedule?'

Faye had never been more exposed than she was right now, practically panting in her desperation for Primo. Her brain was too feverish to try and figure out why this might not be a good idea so she gave in, and a little more of those defensive walls crumbled in the face of Primo's bold charisma.

She said, 'I'm sure it won't be a problem.'

And then let herself be persuaded that indulging in a honeymoon was merely the most effective way to burn themselves free of this inconvenient chemistry as soon as

possible.

Eight hours later

Faye's heart was pumping and her limbs were shaking. She fought to get her breath back and she couldn't stop smiling.

Breathless, sweaty, when she could speak again, she said, 'That was...amazing.'

Primo grinned, and there was a smugness to his expression that didn't even bother her.

'I aim to please.'

Between Faye's legs, the powerful and majestic horse shifted. She leant forward and patted her neck. Her horse was a little smaller than Primo's stallion, but no less impressive.

She looked around her, getting her breath back. They'd just galloped along the shore of an empty beach in the westernmost region of Ireland. Not another soul shared the space with them. The sky, in typical Irish fashion, had gone from blue to grey, sunshine to showers within minutes. And back again.

Primo had surprised her—after they'd started their day again—by taking her to a small private airfield just outside Dublin, where a plane had been waiting to fly them to Galway.

Then a chauffeur-driven car had taken them along the most unbelievably scenic coastal route to a small, fully staffed private castle, overlooking one of the most beautiful beaches Faye had ever seen. Windswept, with a wild sea foaming at the shore.



Primo was a superb horseman, sitting in the saddle with an easy grace. And for a tall man, that was saying something. It was also the first time Faye had seen him in jeans, and if she'd thought him sexy before, now he exuded something far more dangerous.

The horses started to walk back down the beach—clearly this was a regular run for them. When they'd arrived, the housekeeper had shown them around and fed them a delicious late lunch, and then they'd been shown to the stables and the horses, where a groom had kitted them out with boots, jackets and hats.

Faye looked out to the sea now and shook her head. 'I think I've dreamt of a place like this but never thought it could exist.' She looked at Primo who was watching her. 'How did you even know I could ride a horse?'

And then she thought of something, and for a moment she felt the tiniest prick of pain. A pain she really shouldn't be feeling.

Primo had opened his mouth, but Faye put up a hand, forcing a smile. 'No, you don't have to tell me. Presumably whoever did their research into my background saw that I had competed in cross-country horse trials.'

Primo had the grace to look a little shamefaced.

Faye told herself this was a good thing. It would be very easy to be totally swept away by this impromptu trip to one of the most beautiful places she'd ever seen. And she hated it that it felt a little tainted now. The bubble of joy burst.

She wasn't a fool. She knew Primo was investing his time and energy in her so he could turn her into an amenable bride.

She was more glad than ever that she'd laid out her terms from the start. If he hadn't insisted on marrying her, this really might just have been an affair, and that was how

she needed to view it from now on.

Before he might read anything into her response, she gave the horse a gentle kick with her heels and said, 'Race you back to the castle.'

Primo sat in his saddle for a moment, watching the sheer beauty in motion that was Faye on a horse. She and the horse moved as one. Her hair streamed out from under her hat. Her face just now had been beaming with happiness, pink with exertion. Eyes shining. And it had caused an ache to form in Primo's chest so acute that he'd almost put a hand to it.

She'd literally taken his breath away.

He realised that Faye was infinitely more beautiful than he'd given her credit for.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He'd never experienced anything like this before, because he'd never have indulged a lover in case she got the wrong idea. And also, he had to concede, because no lover had ever inspired him to want to do something so fanciful.

To book an Irish castle for a night.

To ride horses on an empty sea-swept beach.

To eat oysters by a blazing fire.

But, as he'd told her, he intended for them to have a honeymoon—and wasn't this the kind of thing honeymooners did? After all, he had decided in Paris that forging as strong a bond as possible between them would be a good investment in this marriage. Hence his decision to follow her to Dublin and surprise her.

But at that moment a series of images from the previous night appeared in his head in Technicolor X-rated detail. As much as he'd like to think he was in control of his actions, he had a niggling sense that any sense of control was an illusion. That in fact he was being driven by far more base impulses.

Nonsense. Of course he was in control.

So why did it bother you so much to see that beaming joy disappear from her face when she'd realised how you knew about her prowess with horses?

Primo could have told her a white lie—that he'd had no idea. But he didn't lie. He had known from the file he'd had prepared on her.

He felt defensive now. Why should that be a problem? It wasn't as if either of them was under any illusions as to why they'd got married.

The point was how they'd forge a successful relationship from this point onwards.

Primo nudged his horse into a canter and swiftly caught up with Faye. He caught her horse's reins, bringing both animals to a halt.

She looked at him, eyes wide. 'What are you doing?'

He leaned forward and took her chin in his hand and kissed her hard. She tasted of sea salt, and he could feel the texture of sand on her face. His kiss gentled, and she resisted for a moment before softening. Something inside him exulted, but he fought temptation and pulled back.

'There was nothing in any file about this between us, Faye. This chemistry is what will take our marriage to another level.'

She looked at him, and her eyes were very green and gold, reflecting the landscape. He couldn't read her and it irritated him. Usually he found women easy to read.

But then she smiled and pulled back. 'If this is your attempt to try and beat me, it's pretty pathetic.'

She nudged her horse and cantered away from Primo towards the castle.

He shook his head at himself. There was nothing to be concerned about. He was letting the Irish mist rolling down off the hills get to him. He went after Faye, and she beat him back to the stable-yard by a nose.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RIDE BACK to the castle had helped elevate Faye's mood again. She really had no right to feel hurt by Primo. He'd never lied to her. And he was right. This chemistry between them was unprecedented, and she had every intention of making the most of it while it lasted.

In the stables, they handed back their hats to the groom and said goodbye to the horses, who were getting hosed down before being fed. Faye felt very dishevelled and windswept, but also happy. She hadn't indulged in horse riding for so long, and it had used to be one of her favourite activities. It made her think of how linear her life had become.

She came out of the stables and Primo was waiting for her, dressed in the same kind of waxy jacket she was wearing—loaned to them by the castle's housekeeper. In his snug worn jeans and boots, hair messy, he suddenly looked a lot younger. And sexier than she'd ever seen him.

Primo was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before, and it sent an electric jolt all the way through her body. He walked over to her and cupped her jaw, eyes roving over her face.

He said, 'Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?'

Faye might have laughed if Primo hadn't looked so serious. Her hair was a wild tangle, any make-up she'd had on had been sand and wind-blasted off her face, and she was pretty sure she'd just stepped in horse manure.

But he'd never looked more gorgeous to her too. The beauty of the landscape, the earthiness of the smell of the horses and salty tang of the wild sea...all seemed to combine to create a mutual urgency.

Primo took her hand and led her through the back door of the castle to the boot room,

where they slipped off their boots. Then, without stopping, he took her hand again and led her up through the house, straight to their bedroom.

At this point Faye couldn't care less that they'd been given only one bedroom. She hardly noticed the gleaming dark wooden floors, overlaid with rugs. The heavy drapes. The blazing fire behind a guard. The huge, imposing four-poster bed. The portraits of strangers on the wall. The gold claw-footed bath by the window.

All she had eyes for was Primo, and all she could think about was how badly she needed to be naked with him. But instead of ripping off her clothes, he stepped up to her and cupped her jaw and her face. Then he kissed her, long and slow and deep, until her legs nearly gave way.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Only then did he start to pull off her jacket, as she did his. Hands tugged and pulled at shirts. Snaps on jeans. Underwear.

It was raining outside now, lashing against the window from an ever-darkening sky, but they were oblivious.

Primo lay down on the bed and pulled Faye over him so she was straddling his thighs. He cupped her breasts and she moved up so he could put his mouth on them. Her back arched and Primo moulded her body, waist and hips. He dipped a hand between her legs and felt how ready she was, and he positioned her over him, holding himself in his hand as she lowered herself onto him with slow, torturous care until he was fully sheathed in her.

They both stayed very still for a moment. Breathing in the sensation.

Faye couldn't look away from Primo's eyes, even though she wanted to. Because even here, in this fevered moment, she knew she should protect herself but it was impossible. He demanded her full attention and she had to give it.

Slowly, she started to move up and down, building the pleasure for as long as she could stand it. Until their skin was slick and their breathing was laboured.

Primo let out a guttural sound, and then, 'Faye, I can't...you're killing me.'

He put his hands on her hips and held her still, while he took over dictating their pace. Faye gave up any illusion that she'd had control at all and handed herself over to the primal rhythm that took over their bodies, bringing them to a soaring climax

that had Primo sitting up and clasping Faye close, their bodies shuddering in unison as pleasure ripped through them and broke them apart.

Faye had a vague sensation of Primo collapsing back onto the bed, taking her with him, and she couldn't fight the urge to sink down into endless ebbing waves of pleasure.

When Faye woke it was dusk outside. Low lights were burning. The bedroom was empty, the fire low in the grate. She noticed a robe on the bed, and once again Primo's consideration made her chest feel a little tight. Her first husband had never thought of such small but important details. She'd put it down to the fact that they'd been much younger, but she knew in her heart of hearts that if her husband had been a good, kind person it would have been evident even then.

She pulled on the robe and went over to where the bathtub sat in front of the window, showcasing a magnificent view of the beach and the sea beyond. It was full of steaming water. Was that what had woken her up?

Faye pulled her hair up, slipped off the robe and stepped into the bath, groaning softly as she sank down into the hot water and it instantly soothed tender muscles.

There was a range of luxury toiletries, and then she noticed a glass of chilled sparkling wine. This decadence truly was next level. She never indulged herself like this.

She picked up the glass and took a sip, relishing the bubbles slipping down her throat. She washed herself and sank back, glorying in the moment, still a little unbelieving that Primo had arranged all this so they could have...ahoneymoon.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was meant to be getting on with her life and her work, and they were meant to be meeting up only at prearranged public events.



But now...

Faye found that she couldn't quite find the thread of thought she should be worried about and sank deeper into the bath.

After a few minutes she realised that she was hungry, so she got out and dried herself. She pulled on the most casual clothes she had with her—a soft, loose pair of trousers and a shirt. She wasn't exactly prepared for this extended trip.

Leaving her hair up, Faye made her way down through the castle—thankfully it was on the modest side—to the kitchen and dining room area. She stopped in the doorway and her heart turned over before she could stop it.

Primo was dressed in low-slung jeans and a T-shirt, stirring something on the stove. There was an open bottle of wine and two glasses on the table. He looked outrageously sexy against the domestic backdrop, and Faye felt a little more of those precious defences crumbling into dust. At this rate she'd have nothing left to cling on to.

And then Primo turned around and she noticed the tea towel flung over his shoulder. Mentally, she sent up a plea to whatever gods were torturing her with this man.

Give me a break!

She came into the kitchen feeling shy. 'Hi.'

He said, 'I can't claim to have done anything but put this over the heat and stir it. That's about the extent of my domestic capabilities, I'm afraid.'

Faye's nose twitched. It smelled divine. She came closer. 'What is it?'

‘Apparently it’s Irish beef and Guinness stew. The housekeeper left it for us.’

Because they’d been too rampant to stop and discuss dinner with her earlier.

Faye busied herself finding bowls and plates. She poured the wine into glasses. The kitchen was large and pleasantly rustic, but with modern touches.

Primo dished the stew into the bowls. ‘You’re happy to eat here?’

‘Of course,’ Faye said. ‘There’s no point causing a mess in another room.’

They sat down and Faye ate some of the stew, closing her eyes in appreciation of the tender meat and delicious flavours. ‘This is amazing.’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo made a similar sound. Then he observed, ‘You’re pretty unspoiled for the heiress to one of America’s largest fortunes.’

Faye took a sip of wine. She felt deliciously relaxed. ‘I could say the same of you. Why aren’t you a playboy brat?’

Primo shrugged minutely as he broke a piece of bread off a loaf and dunked it into the stew. ‘Like you, that lifestyle never really interested me. And I was aware of people gossiping about my father at an early age. If I went into work with him I used to see how he wasn’t really respected, and that made an impression. I felt ashamed. I knew I didn’t want that. From a young age I knew I wanted to restore respect in our family name.’

‘That’s a pretty profound revelation to have. And your brother wasn’t interested at all?’

Primo shook his head. ‘Quin was the nerd—always had his head buried in his computer, coding or gaming.’

‘You were pretty good on that horse today,’ she said. ‘Where did you learn to ride?’

‘Actually...’ he said slowly, as if it was just occurring to him. ‘My mother taught me. She was a brilliant horsewoman. Her family bred racehorses in Brazil.’

‘Were you close before she left?’

Primo shook his head. ‘She was generally too busy fighting with my father. But I’d

forgotten about her taking me horse riding. Quin would have been too small.'

'Do you see her now?'

'Not much—sometimes at social events. I've forgotten what number husband she's on.'

Faye absorbed that. 'I was pretty lucky with my parents, but I always wished I had siblings. I was lonely.'

'What about friends?'

Faye shrugged. 'Sure, I had my friends. But when I wasn't at school the house always felt very empty, and I could tell my parents were sad.'

'They couldn't have more children?'

Faye's insides clenched. How had she let them get onto this topic? She shook her head. 'No. My mother had complications after my birth and couldn't...' She trailed off, because it was too painful to articulate the fact that Faye appeared to have inherited her mother's gynaecological issues.

'I'm sorry.'

Faye avoided Primo's eyes, because she could hear the genuine compassion in his voice. She busied herself clearing their plates, and quickly changed the subject in case his questions became even more personal.

'So, are you going to tell me where our next stop is on this magical mystery honeymoon tour?'

Primo sat back and watched Faye taking the plates over to the sink. He was well aware that she was deflecting talking any further on this topic of conversation, but even though he wanted to ask her if her family history had anything to do with why she was so adamant not to have a family, he decided not to.

A few things were striking him.

Such as how unlike any other woman he'd ever known she was.

She really was incredibly unspoiled. He couldn't think of anyone else who would be happy to sit at a well-loved kitchen table without a silver service and eat a humble, albeit delicious stew.

She was loading the dishwasher now. He didn't even know where his dishwasher was, and he felt a dart of shame.

She was barefoot. But not even the loose casual clothes could hide her beauty. Hair up, tendrils falling down. Face clear and fresh. It reminded him of how she'd looked on the horse...so happy.

He could get used to making this woman happy.

The thought appeared unbidden in his mind. He told himself it was an entirely legitimate thought to have about one's wife. But on a deeper level Primo knew that it wasn't necessarily just about making her happy for the sake of the relationship. It had something to do with makinghimhappy too.

Happy. Since when had he needed to be happy?

He wasn't averse to the idea, obviously, but it wasn't something he'd ever given much thought to. And he realised now that perhaps there was something a bit sad

about never acknowledging the need for happiness...

Faye was looking at him and waving a hand. 'Hi, where did you go?'

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo shook his head. He was losing it. And it was all this woman's fault.

He stood up and topped up the wine glasses before giving one to Faye and taking the other for himself. Then he took her free hand and led her out of the kitchen, back through the castle to the bedroom.

She said, 'You haven't answered my question...where are we going from here?'

Primo brought them into the bedroom and closed the door. He put their glasses of wine down and stripped until he was naked. He directed an expressive look at Faye, and she slipped out of her clothes too.

A flush was rising over her skin and her nipples pebbled. Primo looked his fill, as she did him, and as the hunger clawed and bit at his gut, demanding to be slaked, he felt a frisson of unease. Shouldn't the edge have been taken off by now? But it was as if the more he had of her, the more he needed.

He struggled to control himself. His body was betraying him spectacularly. He dragged his gaze up and all he could see was gold and green, mirroring back the hunger he felt.

'You asked me where we're going from here?' he said.

'I did?'

He nodded.

Faye said, a little breathlessly, 'I'm not sure I care all that much any more.'

'That's good,' he said, and he moved forward and caught Faye's hips, pulling her towards him.

The moment her softer body touched his, he felt the beast roar within him.

Just before he kissed her, and threw them both back into the inferno, he said, 'That's good, because there's nowhere else I want to be other than right here, right now.'

'I have to go to London to take a meeting,' Primo said.

Faye tried to hide her disappointment. They were having breakfast in the formal dining room of the Irish castle the following morning. It was making Faye nostalgic for their cosy, informal dinner in the kitchen the previous evening.

And what had happened afterwards.

She fought down the inevitable reaction of heat rising in her body.

Every time they made love it seemed to eclipse the previous time and she couldn't figure it out. Surely it was meant to go the other way? That was how it had always happened for her before. Even with her first husband she couldn't remember it being like this... So intense. So urgent. Maybe it was no harm that this spontaneous honeymoon was coming to an end.

He said, 'You could come with me, and we could go back to New York together from there.'

She needed to get her wits back.



Faye shook her head. 'No, it's okay. I think I'll go back to Dublin for the day and check out some galleries—they have some really interesting artists showing at the moment.'

'London has galleries too,' Primo pointed out.

'I like to know what's going on outside of the big art hubs.'

'That's why you're so good at what you do.'

A burst of warm pleasure filled Faye's belly. She smiled. 'I try my best.'

'I can drop you off in Dublin and go on to London.'

Faye felt a spurt of regret already, but she said, 'That would be great, thank you.'

When she was getting off the private plane a couple of hours later, she was surprised by a burst of emotion.

Primo was standing with her, waiting for the door to be opened, and she turned to him and said, 'Thank you for that...the castle...the horses...' She was about to say, 'It was magical,' but she amended it. 'I really enjoyed it.'

The door was being opened now, and he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He tipped her face up towards him. 'I enjoyed it too. I'm sorry we're cutting it short.'

## Page 42

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He kissed her then, and Faye felt an urge to change her mind about staying in Dublin. But she resisted the pull. His pull. He was scrambling her brain. She needed to reassess what was happening here—because all she could see was Primo.

He pulled back. ‘See you in Boston.’

She opened her eyes. ‘See you in Boston.’

But a few hours later Primo was already texting her.

Faye was in a city centre art gallery, trying to get her mind back into work mode, when her phone vibrated.

She took it out of her bag.

Hi.

Faye rolled her eyes, but even as she did so her heart was beating fast.

Aren’t you in a meeting?

Yes, but I’m bored. We should have stayed at the castle. It was fun.

Faye blushed. Yes, it had been fun.

She realised she was smiling. Because she was having fun now, texting Primo. And she couldn’t seem to care that it shouldn’t be fun.

He texted again.

What are you looking at right now?

Faye took a picture of the painting in front of her and sent it.

A couple of seconds later:

Is that upside down or meant to be like that?

Faye let out a burst of spontaneous laughter and then quickly covered it with a cough when a couple of other people in the quiet gallery looked at her.

There was another message.

I have to go to a stuffy dinner tonight. I wish you were here. You'd make it so much more interesting.

Faye's heart thumped hard. She sent back:

We can't always get what we want.

Pity!

Faye cursed him, but smiled.

Then she put her phone away, so she wouldn't see any more cutesy texts from Primo.

She left the gallery and walked down the street, and tried to push out of her mind what he'd said.

We should have stayed at the castle.

She passed a boutique and glanced at it, then stopped as something caught her eye. In the window was a dress. It was short and made out of sequins of different colours, giving it an iridescent quality—golds and silvers and rust colours. Exactly the kind of thing she would normally never go for. Too flashy. Too exposing.

Normally.

Following an urge too strong to ignore, Faye went into the boutique and came out twenty minutes later with a bag and a half-baked audacious idea in her head.

London

Primo was sitting at a dinner table in one of London's most famous restaurants. The sounds of the people around him chatting and laughing were muted, soaked up by the luxurious soft furnishings and thick carpet. The decor was dark and mostly leather. The atmosphere was hushed, discreet and very, very exclusive. He'd spotted one ex-American President on the way to his table—who, upon seeing Primo, had made a point of greeting him.

Primo never took things like this for granted. He'd worked to build respect for Holt Industries again after his father's lacklustre attention, and he had no intention of squandering it.

What if Faye wants to divorce you in six months? whispered a little voice.

The notion gave Primo an unpleasant jolt. As if his footing wasn't quite steady, even though he was sitting down. Not possible, he quickly reassured himself.

A kaleidoscope of images from the last few days came into his head. Faye was happy with him. Why on earth would she want to divorce?

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he took it out and looked at it.

How's your dinner going?

Primo smiled.

As boring as I predicted.

You don't look that bored.

Everything inside Primo went very still. Slowly, he looked up from his phone. He surveyed the tables nearby. Mostly men in suits. Like at his table.

His phone pinged again. He looked down.

You're getting colder.

No, he was getting hotter at the very thought that she might be here. Proof, if he even needed it, that this marriage was turning out to be more viable than he could have hoped for.

Primo turned his head the other way, to where there was a bar area. His gaze fell on a woman sitting alone. For a second he didn't recognise her—and then his heart stopped dead. Arrested by the sight of her.

She was sitting on a high stool, dressed in something that appeared to be poured onto her body like a glittering sheath of shimmering colours. Two straps. Low-cut. Long legs, crossed, drawing the eye to her thighs, sleek and toned. Hair down and wavy. She was looking at him, and as he caught her eye she smiled and lifted the delicate flute in her hand in a salute.

Primo's blood thrummed with adrenalin and shock and surprise and sheer...joy to see her.

And in that same moment, as if scenting competition, Primo sensed lots of other males' gazes going to Faye. Alone at the bar. Looking like a vision. For the first time in his life, Primo felt a surge of something very primal. Possessiveness. A need to

stake his claim.

He put down his napkin and cut through the conversation of the other men, saying, 'If you'll excuse me, please? There's something I have to attend to.'

He stood up without waiting for anyone to acknowledge what he'd said and strode straight over to Faye. He caught her scent. Flowery and musky and her.

She looked at him, a glimmer of mischief in her eyes. 'Hello, do I know you?'

Primo put his hands on the arms of her chair, caging her in. 'Oh, I think you know me very well. Intimately, in fact.'

Faye put her head on one side. 'Come to think of it, you do look a little familiar... Isn't it... Holden...something?'

Primo grinned. He realised he was having fun. A concept that he'd never really entertained before, much like whether or not he was happy.

He sent an explicit look to her hand. 'A married woman? In a bar alone? Dressed to tempt the devil?'

Faye opened her eyes wide. 'Are you the devil?'

'I wouldn't have thought so,' Primo responded. 'But right now I'm full of very sinful thoughts and desires.'

'Would you like a drink?'

'I'd love one. Whisky.'

Faye put out a hand. 'Please...join me.'

Primo let go of her stool and sat in the one beside her. He watched her order a drink from the barman and his hands itched to reach out and touch her, claim her. But he was also enjoying this little game.

The barman put his drink down. Primo lifted his glass.

Faye brought hers to his and clinked it gently. 'What are we drinking to?'

'You tell me—you're the one who enticed me over here.'

'Spontaneous encounters.'

He clinked her glass. 'Spontaneous encounters.'

They sipped their drinks.

Faye sent a glance towards the table where he'd been having dinner. 'Won't they be annoyed you've just walked away?'

Primo shook his head. 'I don't want to sound arrogant, but they need me more than I need them.'

Faye glanced quickly over again and back. 'They do look a little disappointed.'

Primo beckoned to the barman and asked, 'Can you send over a bottle of dessert



wine—the 2009 Chateau d’Yquem—to my dinner companions, please.’

Faye made a low whistling noise. ‘Are you sure they’re worth it?’

‘It’ll ease the pain of my absence—as will the fact that dinner was on me,’ Primo said dryly, and raised a glass towards the table as the wine was delivered by a waiter. He looked at Faye. ‘So, are you here on business?’

‘Mainly pleasure for this particular trip.’

Primo let his gaze drop over her body. The dress dipped low between her breasts and he wanted to pull the sparkly material to one side so he could taste her. His body throbbed. He shifted in his seat.

‘And you?’ she asked.

Primo looked at her. ‘Business, ostensibly, but I’m fast being tempted to turn it into something more pleasurable.’

At that, Faye drained her glass of wine and stood up from the seat, bringing her body momentarily between Primo’s thighs. His erection twitched. And then it did more than twitch when she put a hand on his thigh and he felt her squeeze it.

‘I’m afraid I’m a married woman, so I’ll have to go before you tempt me to do something I might regret.’

Primo drained his drink and caught her hand as she was leaving. She looked at him, a picture of innocence and wicked siren all in one.

He said, ‘Let me tempt you. I promise it’ll be worth it.’

She pretended to consider, and then she said, 'If you promise that no one will ever know.'

Primo made a cross shape on his chest. 'I promise.'

Faye tugged him with her, out of the bar, and Primo followed, leaving in his wake an aborted business dinner and not one ounce of regret.

When Faye woke in the morning she was face-down in the bed, her head turned to one side. She cracked open an eye and saw the bed was empty. The previous evening came back in a rush of images and sensations. Sitting in the bar waiting for Primo to notice her. The strength of the jolt of electricity when he had. And the adrenalin when he'd just walked away from his dinner for her.

She hadn't been sure what to expect. It was one thing, him surprising her, but she hadn't known how he'd take her interrupting his work life.

But he hadn't hesitated.

They'd left the restaurant, which was attached to one of London's most exclusive hotels, and when they'd walked into the lobby Primo had said, 'Please tell me you have a room here, or I'll have to book one right now.'

The hunger in his voice and on his face had almost brought her to her knees there and then. She'd silently pulled a room key out of her bag, and he'd taken her hand and led her straight over to the elevator.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

In the elevator, he'd asked roughly, 'What floor.'

'The top,' Faye had answered, breathless. Apparently they weren't playing any more.

As the lift had ascended Primo had pressed the stop button and said, 'This is taking too long.'

It had been exactly the same thing she'd been thinking.

In the next second they'd been pressed together, mouths fused, kissing desperately. Primo's hands had moulded her body to his, finding the slit in the dress, exploring beneath to find the place between her legs where she was embarrassingly ready. She'd gasped into his mouth as he'd stroked his fingers into her, tilting her hips towards him.

She'd climaxed around his fingers, unable to stop herself. She would have drawn back, mortified, but Primo hadn't let her. He'd taken her hand and put it on him.

'Feel what you do to me,' he'd said. He'd rested his forehead against hers. 'You have a hold over me, Faye...like nothing I've ever known before.'

And you over me, she would have said, if she'd been able to speak.

She'd felt a moment of tenderness for him. He'd sounded almost bewildered for a moment. As if he genuinely didn't understand what was going on.

'Do you mind that I came?' she'd asked, before realising the double meaning and

burying her face into his shoulder with fresh embarrassment.

He'd chuckled softly and tipped her chin up, not letting her hide. 'No,' he'd responded. 'I absolutely don't mind. I wonder if I'm dreaming you up.'

Faye had leant forward and nipped at his lower lip. She'd squeezed his firm flesh. 'I'm real. Make love to me, Primo.'

The air had been so white-hot around them, Faye had wondered how their clothes hadn't melted off.

Primo had said, 'Not here.'

He'd pressed the button again, and somehow they'd managed to get to her suite without scandalising the respectable residents of the hotel. And then it had become a heat haze of desperation, and sinking into flesh, and wrapping her legs around Primo's hips and begging, pleading for release, over and over again, until the dawn had streaked across the sky...

And now...

Faye lifted her head and squinted, and let out a little yelp. It was almost lunchtime. Then she noticed the note on stiff white hotel paper on the pillow.

She picked it up and turned onto her back to read it.

See you in Boston. P (Your husband)

It took Faye a second to realise she had a soppy smile on her face. And, as much as she tried, she couldn't seem to rearrange her facial muscles.

The notion that Primo had permanently altered something in her very cells was a little disconcerting.

## CHAPTER NINE

WHILE FAYE WAS waking up, Primo was already high above the Atlantic Ocean—he had a meeting in Manhattan that evening, and Faye had arranged to meet a client in London before she left. He was still marvelling at the previous evening. It was the hottest thing any woman had ever done to him. Surprising him like that. In that dress. The image of her sitting on that high stool would be burned onto his brain for ever.

He felt a burst of pure satisfaction that went deeper than the lingering sensual pleasure—because he had chosen his wife well. He foresaw a long and happy union, in which inevitably this intensity of desire would wane—it had to—but would be replaced with something far more manageable. Not this...fevered need to have her, driving him—and her—to bouts of spontaneity that he was enjoying—there was no denying it—but which ultimately weren't sustainable.

Being distracted away from his business dinner meeting the previous evening had been an anomaly. It unsettled him a little now to acknowledge how easy it had been to walk away. And how unlike him. It was the kind of behaviour his father would have exhibited. Getting distracted by a beautiful woman.

But Faye was his wife. Not just a lover. Perhaps even she would have to concede that all the signs pointed to a sustainable union. But something niggled. Even though he knew every inch of her intimately, and knew how to push her over the edge with just a flick of his finger, she was keeping something in reserve.

After all, she was still maintaining her independence in the relationship. There was no talk of moving in together yet, and while Primo appreciated that on one

level—because of course he didn't intend for this to be an emotional union—spending time with Faye had made him rethink the need for such boundaries. It wouldn't be a hardship to live with her. The thought of having her in his bed every night was...ridiculously seductive.

To his surprise, for the first time in his life he was actually envisaging having a family with someone. Not just as a duty to create the next generation of Holts, but really creating a family, even though he wasn't sure what that looked like. But Faye did. She'd grown up with loving parents. She would be a good mother—he knew that instinctively.

She was inspiring Primo to think that maybe—just maybe—there was a chance that their marriage would prove to be fulfilling in ways that he hadn't fully appreciated.

Boston, a few days later

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Is it too much to hope we can arrive at events together one day soon?

Faye didn't answer Primo's text and shut down her phone. She sighed as the taxi crawled forward in the bumper-to-bumper traffic near the venue in Boston. She wasn't surprised that Primo had been irritated when she'd said she'd make her own way to this function, but her meeting had genuinely run over.

She shook her head again to try and dislodge the woolly feeling. She'd felt an ominous prickling pain at the back of her throat all day today, and she'd been sniffing. She really hoped she wasn't coming down with a cold. She had a massive job the following week in Manhattan—helping a corporate client take delivery of their new art collection, curated by her—and she'd promised to be on hand to help them get it hung properly.

Her limbs felt a little achy. She told herself it was just the effects of the jetlag after her return from Europe.

That magical coastal castle in the West of Ireland felt like a long time ago. She wondered if she'd imagined it?

She hadn't seen Primo since London. She would have, if they'd lived together. The thought that they could have been sharing a bed for the last few days sent simultaneous thrills and trepidation through Faye.

Living together was just a step too far into making this whole arrangement more permanent.

You are married to the man—can't get more permanent than that, pointed out a voice.

Faye scowled at herself.

If anything, the more she got to know Primo, and the more she hungered for him, the more imperative it was to maintain these boundaries she'd put in place. Boundaries she'd never known would become so important.

Because she hadn't expected to want him.

To like him so much.

'We're here.'

'Thank you,' Faye said, jolted out of her spiralling thoughts.

She saw the flow of the immaculately clothed crowd going into one of Boston's oldest buildings for the charity benefit and curbed the urge to tell the driver to keep going.

Just then, her head started to pound. But she couldn't leave. Primo was waiting for her, and every cell in her body was urging her up and out of the car, to go and be with him.

She cursed her weak body, but congratulated herself that he might have got to her physically, but she was still intact emotionally. He might have chipped away at those walls a little bit, but they were still strong enough to withstand all his considerable charm and powers of persuasion.

As she approached the main hall where the event was taking place, she spotted Primo immediately. Clad in a white tuxedo. Hair swept back from his forehead.



Her insides turned to jelly. And suddenly her confidence that she had somehow remained emotionally untouched by this man drained away, to be replaced with something far less certain. She knew him now in ways she never would have imagined she would. And he was so much more than she had thought a man like him could be.

He had got to her.

Faye clutched her evening bag. Maybe if she turned back now the taxi would still be there. She could jump in and—

But at that moment Primo turned to look at her. As if he'd known she was there all along. And she was caught. He was coming for her, the crowd parting to let him through like a sea.

And then he was in front of her and she couldn't breathe.

She'd missed him.

'Hi...'

'Hi.' He looked stern, as if he was about to say something else, but then his expression relaxed. 'I was wondering where you were.'

'Stuck in traffic.'

He took her hand and Faye instinctively wanted to burrow closer. He brought out something very feminine in her that she'd repressed for a long time. A need to feel looked after. Safe. She instantly felt more at ease with her hand in his. And it should annoy her, but it didn't.

‘Come on,’ he said, tugging her into the room thronged with the beautiful and the famous and the rich. ‘I’m having an argument with the governor about the merits of funding art programmes and he needs to hear from a passionate expert, not an idiot like me.’

Faye shoved down all the niggles, psychological and actual—the prickling at the back of her throat, her increasingly fuzzy head and the way she felt hot and cold at the same time—and let Primo lead her into the fray.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

‘Why insist on separate rooms when we know we’ll end up in bed together?’ Primo was asking Faye in the back of the car as they left the event a few hours later.

For the first time since Faye had met Primo she could actually say that making love to him wasn’t foremost in her mind. But the car was pulling to a halt outside the hotel now and Primo had somehow magically appeared at her door in what seemed like a nanosecond to help her out.

She stumbled a little.

‘Are you okay?’ His hand tightened on her elbow.

‘I’m fine. Just tired, I think...maybe coming down with something.’

They were in the elevator now and Primo looked at her. ‘You look flushed.’

He put a hand to her forehead and Faye wanted to swat it away, but it felt like too much of an effort.

‘I think I might have caught something. I’m sure it’ll be gone in the morning.’

When they got to their rooms, and Faye stopped outside her door, Primo asked, ‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

Faye nodded, but winced slightly. It was starting to hurt when she moved her head. ‘I’m just tired.’

‘I’m coming in with you.’

Faye protested. ‘Primo, I’m not sure I’m really feeling—’

‘Not for that.’

He took the key out of her hand and swiped it, opening her door. Inside, he turned on some lights and then went to the connecting door that linked their rooms. He opened the lock on Faye’s side and looked at her.

‘I’m going to open the door on my side too. Let me know if you need anything, okay?’

He handed back her room key. Faye took it and watched him walk out again. A minute later he was unlocking the door on his side, so all Faye would have to do was open her door.

He called through the doors. ‘Night, Faye.’

‘Night, Primo.’

Somehow Faye managed to undress and wash herself, even though it felt like a monumental task. She fell into bed, hoping that by morning she’d be feeling better.

But she wasn’t.

She was worse.

Much worse.

She woke to a persistent banging noise, and when she tried to speak nothing came

out. Her throat was agony, as if filled with hot needles.

She managed to get up and go in the direction of the banging and pulled the door open. She was looking at a broad, bare chest that was vaguely familiar. Primo.

He put a hand on her forehead. 'Faye...you're burning up.'

Faye wanted to say, Give it a rest, Primo, you're not that amazing. But she felt herself become weightless, and then she was being deposited on a bed.

She realised that it wasn't her bed, and struggled to sit up, croaking out, 'Primo, I told you—'

'Yes, a doctor, please, ASAP.'

Faye sank back down. Oh. He wasn't trying to make love to her. He was calling a doctor. For some reason Faye found that momentarily hilarious—until she laughed and it hurt her ribs.

Everything seemed to happen in a bit of a blur after that. A doctor came—a nice lady, who poked and prodded Faye and looked at her throat. Faye's head was clearing marginally, and she heard the doctor say, 'It looks like you've picked up this virulent strain of flu going around.'

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo's voice came. 'I'll take her home. I can take better care of her there.'

Home. The word floated around Faye's head but she couldn't pin it down. It felt comforting, and also slightly scary.

She was given some medication, and water to drink, and that helped to cushion the various symptoms.

At some point—she wasn't sure how—she found she was dressed and on a plane with Primo, shivering.

And then they were in a car, and there was a blast of cool air before she felt weightless again and realised Primo was carrying her.

She lifted her head. 'Hey, I can walk.'

'You're going straight to bed.'

Faye frowned. 'You have a one-track mind, mister. I told you I don't want...'

But the words disappeared out of her mouth and her head and Faye fell into a fractured sleep, punctuated by moments when someone held her up and made her swallow tablets and drink water. Other moments when she would feel boiling hot and cold all at the same time.

There were voices...but the main one she listened out for and found absurdly comforting was the deep one. It was never far away.

At some point Faye woke up. Suddenly her mind was relatively clear and she wasn't drenched in sweat. But she was weak.

She came up on one elbow.

'You're awake.'

A large shape detached itself from a chair in a room that Faye dimly recognised. Primo. He was wearing a shirt and jeans. Bare feet. Hair mussed. Stubble on his jaw.

'Where am I?'

He sat on the bed. 'My apartment. Manhattan.'

She struggled to focus. 'But we were in Boston.'

'Two days ago. We came back here. You have the flu pretty bad.'

'I need to go to the bathroom.'

Primo stood up and pulled back the covers.

Faye realised she was in a set of her own sleep clothes, shorts and a matching button-down top. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Primo put out a hand, but Faye said, 'It's fine. I'm sure I can—' But when she tried to stand, she promptly collapsed again.

Primo put his arm around her and supported her on cotton wool legs into the bathroom. Faye held on to the sink. She felt weak and shaky. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Pale, but with two bright red spots in her cheeks. Hair long and

lank. She groaned inwardly. If this wasn't one way to potentially end this marriage, she didn't know what was.

Primo was hovering.

Faye said, 'I think I'll be okay.'

Primo backed away reluctantly. 'I'll be right outside the door.'

Faye managed to go to the toilet without incident, and washed her face and brushed her teeth. Those small activities were enough to make her feel as if she'd run a marathon.

Primo knocked. 'I'm coming in.'

Faye didn't have the energy to tell him not to, and it was a relief when he scooped her up and took her back to the freshly made bed. Daylight was streaming into the room now, and the French doors to the terrace outside were open, curtains fluttering a little in the breeze.

The housekeeper was just leaving with the bundled-up sheets and Primo said, 'Maybe we'll try some chicken soup?'



‘Very well, Mr Holt. I’ll be right back.’

A name popped into Faye’s head. ‘Marjorie.’

Primo was pulling clean sheets up over her waist. ‘That’s right. She’s my housekeeper here. You’ve met her before.’

The woman came back with a tray that Primo took from her, saying, ‘Thanks.’

Faye’s voice still felt scratchy and a little sore. ‘I’ve been really out of it...’

‘You were. At one point I almost took you to the ER, but you told me not to.’

‘I did?’ Faye had no recollection.

‘Here, try some of this.’

Primo was bringing a spoon to her mouth and Faye obediently opened up. The warm, tasty soup was the most delicious thing she’d ever tasted.

‘Well, you haven’t eaten in days.’

She hadn’t realised she’d spoken out loud. Suspiciously, she asked, ‘Was I saying things?’

Primo brought another spoonful to her mouth and she dutifully drank it down.

He said, 'There was a lot of muttering about fences and walls. And bricks crumbling.'

Faye cringed when she realised the significance of her ramblings. Primo knocking down her precious defences.

She asked, 'What day is it?'

'Tuesday.'

Faye calculated. The Boston event had been on a Friday. She'd lost a whole weekend. And then she realised something else and sat up straight.

'I'm meant to be curating the hanging of new art in the Goldman Law Practice downtown.'

Primo put a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back against the pillow gently. 'Your assistant has let them know you're unwell and they've put the installation on hold until you're better. All your other appointments are being rescheduled.'

She realised something else as Primo fed her another spoonful of soup. After she'd swallowed, she said, 'You've been taking care of me... What about your work?'

'It's fine. I rescheduled some meetings...worked from home.'

The enormity of how ill she'd been hit her—and the way Primo had taken care of her. 'I'm sorry. I had no idea I was coming down with something so bad. I shouldn't have gone to Boston.'

He looked at her. 'How on earth could you have known?'

'I'm feeling better now. I can go back to my own apartment today.'

Primo emitted a sound of exasperation. 'You aren't strong enough yet. You need at least another day...maybe two days...to rest and recuperate.'

'But I—'

Primo put down the tray and stood up, hands on his hips, 'Faye, dammit. I'm your husband. I'm supposed to take care of you. We made vows, remember? In sickness and in health?'

Faye's insides quivered. She'd never seen Primo like this. 'Yes, I know, but...it's not as if we were saying them...' She trailed off.

'For real?' he finished. 'They were real enough to me.'

That landed like a soft blow to her gut. 'But this is just a...a marriage of convenience...a business arrangement.'

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo sat back down. A muscle was pulsing in his jaw. 'Is it, Faye? Really? When we can't keep our hands off each other?' He waved a hand. 'Current circumstances notwithstanding.'

'That's just chemistry.'

He looked at her for a long moment, as if he was going to say something, but then he took the tray back onto his lap and filled another spoon with soup. As he brought it to her mouth he said, 'It's non-negotiable, Faye. You're here under my care until you're strong enough to leave, so get used to it.'

Faye, unused to being spoken to like a recalcitrant child, obediently opened her mouth and let Primo feed her. Something had just shifted between them and she wasn't sure what it was. But by the time she'd finished the soup she was exhausted again, and only too happy to escape Primo's stern mood by slipping back into sleep.

Two days later, as Faye was recovering, she was also realising the true severity of her condition. She'd fallen in love with Primo. And how could she not have? It was as if the man had been specifically put on this Earth to get under every single one of Faye's walls until she was left utterly defenceless. No wonder she'd been raving about that in her delirium. She could only hope Primo had no idea what she'd been on about.

Her assistant had just left Primo's apartment, after going through Faye's rescheduled appointments and meetings, and he'd also brought over what had appeared to be half of Faye's possessions, which were now being installed in Primo's guest room. Faye had agreed that it would be practical to have some things here, because Primo wasn't

letting her go anywhere until he was satisfied she was completely fine.

She was feeling inordinately vulnerable after this revelation on top of all the signs of Primo exerting his very skilful brand of taking over her life as well as her heart.

When he appeared in the informal living area where she'd had her meeting with her assistant, dressed in those jeans that should come with a health warning and a shirt, Faye—whose reviving libido only made her feel even more exposed—said waspishly, 'I'm not sure you didn't make me ill on purpose to engineer this campaign to all but move me into your apartment.'

Primo folded his arms. He looked far too smug for his own good. He said, 'I'll be the first to admit that I'm pretty much capable of anything, but I haven't quite perfected my skills in sorcery.'

Faye scowled at him, hoping that he wouldn't see the truth of her emotions. How had she let this happen?

As if to help her, a kaleidoscope of images raced through her mind—from that first meeting with Primo, to Venice, then Paris, Dublin, the castle in the West of Ireland, London... It was like a string of jewels laid out, twinkling at her and mocking her for believing she could remain immune to this man's undeniable charm.

Then he said, 'I have something for you—a little get-well gift.'

Faye sat up. She wished she was wearing something other than yoga pants and sweatshirt. But it was an improvement on nightclothes.

Primo bent down and retrieved something from behind a sofa. It was a square-shaped item, wrapped in brown paper, measuring about one foot square.

He handed it to her and she held it. Not too heavy. She started to undo the paper, pulling it open, and realised it was a small canvas that looked familiar. Striking deep red and pink tones. She held it up and away from her face—and then noticed the signature on the bottom.

‘Lara Lopez...’ Faye gasped when she realised what it was. A miniature of the original much larger painting she’d admired so much in Paris. ‘Life.’ She looked at Primo. ‘How...?’

‘I got in touch with her to see if she’d sell the one in Paris, but she has an agreement with the gallery so she can’t. But she told me she had this, which was the genesis of the bigger painting. Her trial run...’

Faye was struck dumb. Beyond moved that he’d not only remembered her loving that painting but that he’d gone to the trouble of trying to track it down. This one was smaller, yes, but it was perfect.

Faye looked at Primo again. ‘I can’t believe you did this...it’s very special. Thank you.’

For a second she was terrified she might cry, when she’d thought she’d cried her last tears over her first husband and the devastation that she’d never give birth to her own children.

Primo took the painting from her and put it on the mantelpiece. ‘You can decide where you want it. We can get it framed.’

Faye stood up, her limbs still feeling slightly wobbly. ‘I love it. I’m glad the other one stays in the gallery, though, because people should get to see it. This is...perfect. Thank you, Primo. You didn’t have to get me anything, but I do love it.’

He glanced at his watch. 'I have a meeting in the office. Do you mind if I leave the apartment for a couple of hours?'

Suddenly overwhelmed by everything—her revelation and this gesture—Faye said hurriedly, 'No, not at all. You really don't have to babysit me.'

Primo was about to leave when he turned back. 'You'll still be here when I get back?'

Faye tried to think of some pithy remark but in the end she just nodded. 'Yes, I'll be here.'

Primo walked out and Faye sank back onto the couch and gazed at the painting. There, laid bare, was every pulsing, beating bit of emotion she felt for Primo. But Faye knew that, as much as he would prefer her to be absorbed into his world, like an amenable wife, he wouldn't thank her for falling in love with him.

Primo came back to his apartment that evening and all was quiet. Marjorie would be gone for the day. For a second he imagined that Faye might be gone too, even though she'd said she wouldn't.

The surge of conflicting emotions that thought brought up propelled him into the main living area. Empty. As was the kitchen. He checked her bedroom. The bed hadn't been slept in all day. A good sign. But where was she?

Eventually he thought to check the media room and found her on the couch, asleep under a large shawl. Hair flowing around her head. Feet bare. One arm above her head. She was wearing the least enticing outfit imaginable, and yet Primo's blood leapt.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

She stirred, as if sensing him, and opened her eyes. She looked deliciously drowsy and flushed. For a second, he saw a slow smile start to lift that tempting mouth—before her brain obviously kicked into gear and her eyes widened and she scrambled to sit up. Back behind those walls.

He put out a hand. ‘Sorry I didn’t mean to wake you.’

She pushed hair out of her face. ‘What time is it?’

‘After eight. I got held up.’

She sent him a look. ‘Because you’ve been playing nursemaid to me, no doubt.’

‘I brought home some takeout.’

At that moment Faye’s belly rumbled. Her appetite was obviously back with a vengeance. She blushed. Primo marvelled that she could still blush so easily.

‘That sounds nice,’ she said. ‘What is it?’

He held out a hand and helped her up from the couch. He said, ‘Thai. Is that okay?’

‘I love Thai.’

They went into the kitchen and Faye sat on a stool on the other side of the counter to Primo, where he busied himself putting containers into the microwave to heat them up.



Faye said, 'I wonder who's in the Irish castle now? Are they having Irish stew too? Did they go on the beach with the horses?'

Primo ladled some rice and sauce into a bowl and handed it to Faye with cutlery. 'You really loved that place, didn't you?' he observed.

Faye nodded. 'Maybe my ancestry is Irish, not Scottish,' she joked. And then, 'I never go horse riding any more...it reminded me how much I loved it.'

'Nothing stopping you from taking it up again.'

Faye sighed. 'I guess not... But it's just easy to forget to carve out time for those things, you know? And then, before you know it, years have gone by...'

'Are you always so chipper after a bout of sickness?'

Faye sent Primo a sheepish look. 'Sorry. I guess I haven't had so much time off in a long time. I like to keep busy.'

Primo could empathise with that. Since marrying Faye, though, he'd taken more time off than he'd ever done before. He'd also—as he'd found out today—taken his eye off the ball to some extent. Deals had been languishing, waiting for his signature or decision.

His chief legal advisor had said, before leaving Primo's office, 'Maybe it's time to start delegating? After all, you're a married man now. Presumably you'll be starting a family...'

Primo had realised that he'd arrogantly assumed that even while investing some time in his new wife he wouldn't be letting anything slide, but he'd had to acknowledge that hadn't been realistic. Faye was a priority now—in a way he hadn't fully

envisaged when he'd decided to marry her.

These last few days, while she'd been ill, he'd felt helpless. For a man who was rarely helpless, it had been an unwelcome and humbling experience. He'd had to watch as the virus worked its way through her system, not being able to negotiate with anyone for a speedier exit. And the relief he felt now, to see her return to health, was also humbling.

He liked having her here. And not just because she was his wife and he felt she should be here. There was an added dimension to coming home and knowing she would be around that he hadn't really anticipated, and it transcended even the notion of being able to sleep with her every night. Although that obviously appealed too.

He told himself this wasn't about emotions—it was purely practical.

Maybe now that she'd seen how they could be together even when it wasn't all about urgency and chemistry she would reconsider some things. Notably her reluctance to have a family. But Primo knew he would have to tread carefully. He'd gained some ground, and he had no intention of squandering it, but he also had every intention of getting her to agree to consider taking this marriage to the next level.

A far more permanent and enduring one.

## CHAPTER TEN

'SÃO PAULO?' REPEATED FAYE, like a parrot.

She'd woken up that morning feeling almost fully normal again for the first time in days. But she still felt that lingering sense of frustration she'd felt last night, when after dinner she'd tried to subtly let Primo know that she was feeling a lot better, in almost every regard, especially where her desire was concerned.

Only to have him put his hands on her arms and move her away from him, saying,  
'You still look a little tired.'

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

She'd lain in bed stewing with a mix of anger and fear that, after seeing her at her worst, he didn't fancy her any more.

Now they were having breakfast.

'Yes, São Paulo,' he said. 'My brother has extended an invitation for us to visit.'

Faye went still and looked at Primo. He was avoiding her eye. 'Oh, that's good...isn't it?'

Primo was brusque. 'I haven't seen him in a long time, or met his wife, so I guess it's a good thing.'

He was nervous. Faye could feel it. Her heart went out to him.

'It'd be nice to meet them,' she said.

He looked at her then. 'It would be good for your recuperation...some sun and relaxation.'

'I had the flu—not TB,' Faye pointed out.

Primo regarded her. 'It was a severe enough bout that you're not arguing with me about work.'

For once, that hadn't been uppermost in Faye's mind. She scowled at Primo, but he just smiled, and in that moment it was more important than anything to Faye that

she'd distracted him from his trepidation about seeing his brother.

She was in so much trouble.

They left New York as dawn rose the following morning. Faye had dressed in soft jeans and a short-sleeved cashmere top. Primo was on the other side of the plane, engrossed in paperwork and on the phone to someone called John.

Faye was enjoying being able to watch him. To see how his lips pursed and the way he ran his hand through his hair, mussing it up. He was wearing a shirt and dark trousers. Every inch a successful titan of business. The fact that she knew the man underneath gave her a serious thrill.

Which fizzled a little when she thought of how caring for her through her illness had killed his desire for her. She made a quick calculation and felt a burst of despair. They'd only been married for just over a month and she'd already fallen for him so hard that it made whatever she'd felt for her first husband look like a teenage crush. And the demise of that relationship had all but dictated her entire last decade.

Primo made her want things she hadn't admitted to herself that she wanted in so long. Safety. Security. Companionship. A lover. A family.

No. She blocked that thought out immediately. That way lay only certain pain, and she would never expose herself to that again.

She would never know the pain of Primo looking at her as if she was an empty useless vessel, because he would never know the full extent of her painful history.

There was a minimum of five months left before Faye could take advantage of the six-month get-out clause and obtain a divorce and move on. But, she reasoned, if her bout of sickness had given Primo the ick where the physical part of the marriage was

concerned, then at least if Faye re-established their boundaries, and didn't agree to any more little impromptu trips like this, they could get back to the business of a convenient marriage.

An hour later Faye couldn't sleep, in spite of the comfortable bed where she'd retreated to stop herself ogling Primo while he worked. Her mind was going a hundred miles to a minute, mainly castigating herself for falling in love with Primo. For allowing him to open up deeply buried desires and dreams.

She heard a noise and came up on one elbow to see the object of her thoughts in the doorway.

'Hey...' Her voice still felt a little scratchy.

'Hey.'

Faye was still in her clothes, but Primo was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before. His gaze seemed navy in the low lights of the bedroom, and she could see how it dropped over her body, lingering on her breasts, belly, thighs. She could feel it like a physical touch.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

Because he didn't want her any more. Right?

Then he asked, 'Can I join you?'

Very belatedly, Faye realised that he must be tired—they'd both been up early. She went to scramble off the bed. 'Of course. Sorry. You take the bed. I can go back out—'

‘Where are you going?’

She was sitting on the side of the bed now, looking at him. ‘To give you some space?’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

He shook his head and started to undo his shirt. Faye's eyes helplessly tracked his fingers as his chest was revealed. Did he think she was going to just stay here and lie next to him?

She stood up—but that only brought her to within an inch of his body.

He put his hands on her arms. 'Where are you going?' he asked again.

There was a gleam in his eye that she couldn't quite fully trust. But she heard herself blurting out, 'You don't want me any more.'

Primo's eyes widened incredulously. 'Why on earth would you think that?'

She avoided his eyes. 'I was sick...it wasn't a pretty sight.'

He caught her chin, made her look at him. 'Do you have any idea how hard it was not to touch you? Would you want me less if I was sick?'

Joy and relief bubbled up inside her, making her a little giddy. 'Well, I guess it would depend... I mean, if you had those nasty little—'

He cut off her words with his mouth, but she could feel his smile and her insides somersaulted and swooped. All the lectures she'd given herself about redrawing boundaries faded into the background when faced with the fact that Primo still wanted her.

Things escalated quickly. His shirt was off. He'd pulled her top up and she'd lifted



her arms to help him remove it. Jeans and trousers were undone and kicked off.

They tumbled onto the bed and Primo drew back for a moment and looked at her, clad in the lace and satin of her underwear.

She said, 'I've never done it on a plane before.'

Primo arched a brow.

Suddenly Faye felt blindingly jealous. 'You have.'

Primo palmed a breast, pulling down the lace cup to expose the plump flesh, teasing a nipple between two fingers. Faye's back arched as she tried to hang on to her indignation.

Primo said, 'I admit it's not my first time, no. But if it's any consolation, I can't even remember the woman. And, as this is your first time, I'll be very, very gentle.'

Faye forgave him as he lowered his mouth to hers and drugged her with a very explicit kiss, hands moving over her body, removing the scraps of underwear.

They came together in a deliciously slow, sensual dance, as gentle as Primo had promised. Until, of course, neither one of them wanted gentle any more, and the pace of their movements and the glide of their bodies became more urgent and desperate.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, heels digging into his buttocks as he thrust in and out, taking them higher and higher, until the climax broke over them simultaneously, both too desperate for this pinnacle to eke it out.

Primo buried his head in her shoulder, breathing fast. 'I'm sorry...wanted to make it last...'

Faye felt a surge of tenderness and smiled dreamily. 'It was perfect. Amazing.'

Primo lifted his head and looked at her. 'What do you do to me, woman? I don't know who I am when I'm with you...'

Faye's gaze moved around his face, as if she wanted to imprint every feature on her mind for ever. She landed on his mouth and traced the shape with her finger. 'I know the feeling.'

They fell asleep, Faye tucked into Primo's body, his arms tight around her, as they chased the sun across the sky.

São Paulo

Late that afternoon they were in a car and waiting for the gates to Primo's brother's home to open. It was at that precise moment that Faye recalled Primo mentioning that they had a little boy and baby twin girls, about eight months old.

What had she been thinking?

She'd instinctively avoided being around babies and small children ever since her miscarriage and operation. But it was too late now. The gates were opening and they were driving between two verdant walls of lush foliage.

They emerged into a huge open space in front of a modern two-storey house. Lots of windows. Faye could see a green lawn, strewn with kids' toys. Her insides twisted.

Waiting for them was a tall man who Faye recognised instantly as Primo's brother, but his colouring was lighter, and he was infinitely more casual in low-slung board shorts and a T-shirt. A pretty woman with long reddish-blond wavy hair stood beside him. Average height. Wearing short cut-off jeans and a pretty loose summer

top. She looked nice.

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

The car came to a stop and a small blond-haired boy appeared and opened Faye's door. She didn't have time to react. He was holding out his hand.

'Hi, I'm Sol. Are you my Aunt Faye?'

Faye was instantly won over. She shook his hand. 'Yes, I believe I am. Nice to meet you, Sol.'

The woman appeared behind Sol and grabbed him. 'I'm so sorry. We told him to wait and not overwhelm you.'

Faye got out and the woman stuck out a hand. 'I'm Sadie. It's so nice to meet you.'

'You too.' Faye smiled, feeling shy.

Then she looked to see Primo approaching his brother. Both similar heights and builds. They were wary, but then Quin moved and pulled his brother into an embrace. Faye could see that Primo was taken by surprise, but he hugged his brother back.

Quin came and said hi to Faye. She noticed he had brown eyes.

He tucked his wife under his arm and she wrapped an arm around his waist.

'You guys must be hungry,' she said. 'Let's eat and then we can show you around.'

Faye sat back and observed the brothers and Sadie throughout most of the delicious early evening dinner, served in a vast open plan kitchen/dining space.

Before they'd landed in São Paulo, Primo had told her a little about Quin and his wife. That they'd been estranged for a few years but had now reunited. In that time, Quin had had sole care for his son, Primo had told Faye.

'I'm still not sure exactly why they had to split up, but they're back together now.'

To Faye's eye now, it didn't look as if anything could part Sadie and Quin again. They touched constantly and shared little looks in a way of communicating that could only come from a very intimate union. She hated herself for feeling a twinge of envy.

They had appeared with two sleepy dark-haired babies just before dinner was served. Stella and Luna—twin girls. Faye had felt the habitual pain on seeing them, but pushed it down deep. And then they'd gone to put them to bed with the help of a woman called Madalena, their nanny, who seemed to be almost a member of the family, as close as a grandparent.

'I can stay up for dinner with guests because I'm five now,' Sol had declared once Quin and Sadie had returned. They'd brought a baby monitor with them, presumably to keep an ear out for the babies.

Faye had smiled at the precocious young boy. 'You're very grown up indeed.'

Sol piped up now. 'Hey, do you like football, Uncle Primo? It's my favourite.'

Primo smiled. 'It's been a long time since I played, but maybe you can show me?'

'Cool! Tomorrow?'

'Of course—if your parents don't mind.'

Faye couldn't help noticing that Primo was a little stiff in his exchanges with Sol.

Obviously he hadn't had much to do with children. She could see him being a good father, though. He was kind, and compassionate, and she felt that, if given the chance, he would want to do things differently from his own father.

She felt a pang of pain—because he wouldn't ever have that chance with her.

To distract herself, she got up to help Sadie clear up, pooh-poohing the woman's protests. She said to her in the kitchen, 'You have a beautiful home and family.'

Sadie looked a little dreamy, and then said, 'Thank you. I don't take it for granted for one second.'

After Sol had gone to bed, Quin said, 'I'll show you to the guest house. It's nice and private.'

He led them down through the garden, automatic lights coming on to guide their way. They walked through a small copse of trees to find a smaller version of the big house, and a pool nearby.

Quin gestured to it. 'Feel free to make yourselves at home. There's a pool hut with swimsuits and towels—whatever you need.'

He showed them into the guest house. Another open-plan, gorgeously decorated space. Understated luxury. A fully stocked kitchen.

'Thank you so much,' said Faye. 'This is truly lovely.'

## Page 55

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

‘Like I said, make yourselves at home. I’m really glad you’re here.’

He left them, and Faye noticed that all their stuff had already been unpacked and put away.

Primo was looking a little stunned.

Faye went up to him. ‘Are you okay?’

He nodded. ‘It’s just a lot...to take in. He’s younger than me, but I feel like he’s older.’

‘I guess having children will do that to you,’ Faye joked.

Primo looked at her and pulled her close, she went willingly.

He said, ‘Thank you for coming with me.’

‘You’d have been fine on your own.’

‘I think it helps to have people around to defuse the tension between me and Quin.’

Faye shook her head. ‘I don’t think he bears any grudges. And Sadie seems nice. Normal.’

‘She’s good for him.’ Primo looked at the bed then, and said with faux innocence, ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.’

Faye moved closer, pressing against Primo. 'Me too.' She reached up and pressed a kiss to his jaw. 'Absolutely wrecked.'

He started taking off her clothes, and Faye savoured every single moment leading up to them both being naked.

They made love in their own private tropical forest house, but afterwards, even as her body hummed with a sense of deep satisfaction, Faye couldn't escape the uneasy sensation that this was where things would come to a head.

There were so many raw emotions flying around, and she wasn't sure if she'd be able to escape unscathed. It was getting harder and harder to try and hide the depth of her feelings around Primo.

The following day, Primo surveyed the domestic scene before him on the lawn. His nephew, Sol, was shadowing his two crawling twin sisters like a mother hen. Gently manoeuvring them in a safer direction if he thought they were getting too close to danger. Sadie was talking to Faye, and both women were watching the little tableau.

Faye was relaxed here in this domestic situation. Not fazed. Not bored. Not sending him pointed looks as if to say, 'When are we leaving?' He'd noticed that she did seem a little reluctant to get too close to the children, but he put it down to lack of experience, like him. Sol and the babies alternately fascinated and terrified him.

Absurdly, emotion rose. Emotion that he hadn't felt in years. In for ever. Not since he was a small boy, when he'd pushed it down deep, because he couldn't be the one to lose it over their mother leaving. Quin had done that for both of them. Primo had had to be strong.

'I'm sure this is nothing like you're used to,' said Quin.



His brother's dry tone cut into Primo's reflections. He shook his head, didn't dare look at his brother just yet, in case he saw something Primo wasn't quite ready to reveal. But things were sinking into place inside him, whispering of yearnings that he'd only recently allowed himself to think of. A life with Faye—a whole life.

Maybe this was why he'd gravitated towards seeing his brother. Because he'd needed to see this, feel it first-hand. Feel a desire for this. Something he and Quin had never really experienced and yet here he was—in this idyll of...a family. Love. For the first time he was seeing it up close, and he had to admit that for some...it could exist.

Primo said, 'Family is important, isn't it?'

Then he clarified, 'I mean, this.' He gestured to the scene before them where Sadie had now put the twins in a double buggy in a shaded area and was kicking a ball with Sol. 'Not what our father drummed into us.'

He looked at Quin, who was watching him carefully.

Quin said, 'It's everything. The only thing that matters.'

Primo blurted out, 'I'm sorry.'

Quin frowned. 'For what?'

'For not checking that you were okay after...everything.'

'After discovering our father wasn't my father?'

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo nodded. ‘And earlier...when we were younger. I should have taken more care over you. You’re my baby brother.’

Quin smiled and shook his head. ‘I was just thankful that I wasn’t you. You took the pressure off me to be something I had no desire to be.’

Primo glanced at his nephew and his sister-in-law and said, ‘Still, I’m sorry that we didn’t have more of this... More time to be brothers without cares.’

‘There’s still time.’

Primo looked at Quin and felt the emotion rise again, swelling his chest. ‘Thank you,’ he said, his voice slightly rough.

‘Hey, Uncle Primo! Come and play with us!’

Primo welcomed the distraction and went to join Sadie and his nephew.

The baby—one of the babies—was crying. Faye looked around helplessly, but everyone had disappeared. Quin had gone inside. Primo and Sadie and Sol were hunting for the ball that Primo had kicked into the copse of trees. And one of the babies was now wailing pitifully.

Faye got up and went over and peeked under the muslin net. A pair of dark eyes looked up at her. Beautiful eyes. Ringed with long lashes. A rosebud mouth. She’d stopped crying momentarily, but now her little face scrunched up again and the mouth opened.

Faye whispered, ‘Oh, no, please don’t. You’ll wake your sister and I don’t know what to do.’

But now she was wailing again and so, acting on an instinct too strong to ignore, Faye reached in and carefully extracted the baby. She was heavier than she’d expected, and she looked at Faye for a moment with tear-laden lashes before reaching out her pudgy arms.

Faye put her over her shoulder and awkwardly patted her back. She seemed to like that. She stopped crying. Faye walked up and down, jiggling her a little on her shoulder.

‘You’re a natural.’

Faye turned around to see Sadie. She was vaguely aware that Primo and Sol were playing football again. ‘Oh, no, I’m not. Really, I’m not. I’ve hardly ever held a baby.’

Faye felt sure Sadie would rush to take her baby back, but the woman seemed utterly unconcerned.

She checked on the other twin and chuckled. ‘Stella is the lazy one—she’ll sleep through a tornado. Luna wants to know what’s going on. She obviously wanted to meet you.’

Faye smiled, but it felt shaky. Holding this warm, trusting baby was bittersweet. Her head was nestled into Faye’s neck. She could feel her breath against her skin.

Sadie asked, ‘Are you and Primo...? Do you plan on having a family?’ And then she put a hand over her face and said. ‘Please—forgive me. You don’t have to answer that. It’s such an intrusive question and you’re only just married.’

But Faye shook her head. With this baby in her arms, and Sadie's easy manner, she heard herself admitting, 'I've told Primo that I won't have children...but it's not that I won't... I can't.'

Sadie's hand went to her mouth. Her eyes filled with compassion. 'Oh, Faye, I'm so sorry. I had no idea...'

Much to Faye's horror, she could feel her eyes prickling. As if sensing Faye's unravelling, Sadie reached for the baby and deftly re-installed the now sleeping infant back into the pram.

She discreetly led Faye away from the garden. 'Are you okay?'

Faye nodded. 'I'm so sorry... It's just...'

It all tumbled out—how their marriage was really only a marriage of convenience, but that Primo did want a family at some point, and Faye had no intention of telling him that could never happen so she was going to leave when the six months was up.

'I'm so sorry, Faye... You're in love with him, aren't you?'

Faye nodded. 'Pathetic, isn't it?'

'Not really,' Sadie commiserated. 'I suffer from the same affliction.'

'But Quin adores you.'

Sadie made a face. 'It wasn't straightforward for us... But that story would require at least a bottle of wine.'

'Mama! Luna is awake again.'

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

They heard the sound of Luna crying and Sadie rolled her eyes. ‘I’m sorry, it’s actually time for a feed—that’s why she’s restless.’

‘Go,’ said Faye, pushing her emotions down. ‘I’m sorry you had to hear all that.’

Sadie squeezed her hand. ‘We’re sisters now, no matter what happens. Okay?’

Faye nodded, feeling absurdly emotional again.

When she felt she was composed enough, she moved back around to the patio—and stopped dead in her tracks. Primo was holding one of the twins in his arms and Quin was showing him how to feed her with a bottle.

There was an awestruck look on Primo’s face that Faye had never seen before. And never would see again. Because now she knew that she couldn’t continue this charade. Coming here had broken something inside her, and she hadn’t even thought she’d had anything left to break.

Faye felt a spreading sense of hollow loneliness.

Damn Primo Holt.

She wished in that moment that she’d never laid eyes on him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

PRIMOWASAFRAIDto breathe.

Quin chuckled. 'They're quite sturdy you know.'

His little niece was staring up at him with huge dark eyes, as if he held all the knowledge in the world, as she greedily drank down the milk.

'Then you have to pat her on the back, Uncle Primo, but she might get sick on you.'

Primo tore his eyes away from the baby to look at Sol, who seemed like an old pro at this baby-feeding lark. Then something caught his peripheral vision, and he saw Faye walking quickly down the lawn towards the guest house.

She seemed in a hurry, and Primo would have called out, but he didn't want to upset the baby.

After he'd been schooled in the art of winding the baby, and she'd let out an impressive belch, Quin took her back and said, 'Well done, brother, your first feed. You can thank me for the practice when your firstborn comes along.'

Primo felt something uneasy settle in his gut.

He stood up. 'I'm going to check on Faye.'

'Come in for dinner around six? We'll have a barbecue this evening.'

Primo nodded and left Quin holding one daughter and Sadie with the other baby. He thought he noticed that Sadie looked at him slightly strangely, but told himself he was being paranoid.

Maybe now was the time to have that conversation with Faye. Surely by now she would have to admit that what they had was good. And that it could endure.

But when he walked into the guest house the first thing he saw was Faye packing her bag. She seemed agitated.

‘Hey, what’s going on? Did something happen? Your father...?’

She went still. And then she stood up straight and faced him. She was pale. Her eyes looked huge.

She shook her head. ‘No, it’s not my father...or anything like that. It’s me. I have to go. I’m going to request a divorce, Primo. I’m sorry, but I can’t wait for the six months.’

Primo was looking at her as if she was losing her mind. She was. She was in full panic mode. She needed to get away from here and from Primo now. This place was the manifestation of the dream she’d always had of what family life could be, but it was also—cruelly—her worst nightmare. Because she could never have this. And she certainly couldn’t give it to Primo.

She took a breath in and forced herself to try and calm down. He deserved to know everything.

She said, ‘I saw you with the baby just now...’

Primo was shaking his head as if trying to understand. ‘A second ago you said you had to leave. You said you want a divorce.’

Faye nodded. 'I did.'

'What's going on? What on earth has seeing me with the baby got to do with anything?'

Faye was wringing her hands in front of her. 'That's just it. It has everything to do with everything. With us. I saw how you looked at her, Primo. How you've started to heal the rift with your brother. And that's amazing. But I can see what you're thinking. That maybe you want this too...what he has. Areallife. Family.'

The wordlovewas on her tongue, but she bit it back. He might want more, but she was sure that love wasn't part of it.

He looked at her. 'Yes...maybe. And I have been wanting to talk to you. Can't you see that what we have between us is so much stronger than we expected it would be? It's made me think that perhaps...perhaps it could be possible to do things differently. I'd never thought about children before as anything but a means to an end...extending the family legacy and name,' he went on. 'But creating a family with you, Faye... You've inspired me to want something I never thought I wanted before. Never thought I could have.'

Emotion rose, burning inside Faye. She did her best to stop it from spilling over. 'That's just it, you see. I can't give you that.'

Primo shook his head again. 'What is so awful about the prospect of having a family with me, Faye?'



‘You’re not listening to me. I said, I can’t give you that. Literally, cannot.’

He made a snorting noise. ‘You mean won’t. What is it? Are you using this as a bargaining chip to get something even more?’

Faye was horrified. Never would she have thought he’d go there. ‘No! How could you think that?’

But you have deceived him.

‘Primo, please listen to me. There’s something I haven’t told you. I haven’t been entirely...transparent.’

He opened his mouth, but she put up a hand to stop him. He closed his mouth. She lowered her hand.

‘When I was with my first husband, I got pregnant straight away. A textbook conception.’ Faye tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. ‘But within a few weeks I was bleeding. A miscarriage. It got complicated. I was taken into hospital. They cleared the miscarriage, but they told me I needed an operation or I might die.’

She forced herself to look at Primo.

‘I had to have a partial hysterectomy.’

Primo was looking at her blankly.

Faye forced herself to spell it out. ‘They took my uterus, Primo. I have no uterus. I cannot bear children.’

After a long moment he asked, ‘Why didn’t you tell me this?’

Faye sank down on the end of the bed. 'Because I've never told anyone, really. Not even my father knows. I hardly knew you. I didn't think it was any of your business.' A little defensively, she said, 'And I told you right from the start that I wouldn't have children. So youknew.'

Primo was shaking his head. 'No, you don't get to pin this on me, Faye. You saidwouldn't. There's a big difference between that andcouldn't. And do you know what that difference is? The belief that there's a possibility that you'd change your mind.'

'I didn't think it would ever be an issue. I had no idea that our marriage would become something neither of us expected. I'm sorry, Primo. I should have told you the truth from the start.'

Even amidst the tension between them right now, Faye felt as if something heavy was lifting from her shoulders. The weight of her painful secret.

Primo looked at her, eyes widening. He snapped his fingers. 'That'swhy you insisted on the six-month get-out clause. You never had any intention of this lasting longer than six months, did you?'

She couldn't lie. 'No.'

Primo's jaw was tight. 'I told you at the very beginning that I didn't play games, but this has all just been one long game to you, haven't they? All you were interested in were the short-term benefits, and yet you ensured you'd reap the long-term benefits for your father and your family business.'

Faye stood up again. 'Don't pretend you started out with any better intentions than I did. You got your business deal and your convenient wife as a bonus. Why would I have shared my most private pain with someone who had picked me out of a file of

potential wives?’

‘Because you knew very well that I always had the long term in my sights. And because as soon as we met it was clear that the spark between us was anything but convenient.’

‘We could have just had an affair. Maybe that’s all it should have been.’

‘That horse has bolted, Faye. I don’t usually let people get the better of me, but you blinded me.’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

‘I wasn’t trying to blind you,’ Faye said miserably.

I was too busy being blinded by you and falling in love.

‘So what was your plan? Wait out the six months then take your leave, as per the get-out clause? No harm, no foul?’

Faye nodded. ‘I didn’t think it would be an issue. I believed we’d be living very separate lives, and that when it came to it you wouldn’t want to stay married anyway. But then...it became something else.’

Everything.

‘You didn’t know that the best sex of your life would happen within a marriage of convenience?’ Primo laughed harshly, ‘Well, go figure...me neither.’

Faye winced. ‘You’ll find another wife and—’

He cut her off. ‘That’s what you thought? That I’d just weather the fallout of a failed marriage and get on with choosing wife number two?’

She winced. ‘I’m sorry, Primo... It all happened so fast and I was sure it wouldn’t last...’

Primo closed the distance between them so quickly that Faye couldn’t speak. He took her arms in his hands.

‘What wouldn’t last, Faye? This?’

His mouth crashed down on hers, and even amidst the tension and the anger and the recriminations Faye melted into Primo, every cell singing to be close to him, to have him touch her.

He pulled back, eyes blazing. ‘Does that feel like it’s going anywhere?’

No. It felt stronger than ever. Like a live force.

She pulled free of Primo and put some distance between them. ‘I never meant for this to happen,’ she said. As if they could have controlled it!

‘It happened,’ Primo said flatly.

Faye lifted her gaze and forced herself to meet Primo’s blistering blue one. Not hot anymore. Cold.

‘I’m truly sorry, Primo, for not telling you the truth. It’s a painful secret I’ve kept from almost everyone for ten years. It’s part of the reason I haven’t been in any relationships beyond the very superficial. After my husband rejected me, I didn’t believe I’d be enough on my own for anyone. Maybe I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to be in a position where you felt you had to stay with me out of some sense of loyalty.’

She continued painfully.

‘But it doesn’t change the fact that I cannot give you a family, Primo, and there’s not enough to sustain us without that family. It’s better that I leave now. We’ll get a quiet divorce and you can get on with choosing a more suitable wife. I don’t think your reputation will be too damaged—men seem to have more leeway in that regard than

women.'

Primo was reeling with everything he'd just learned. With how badly Faye had deceived him. It threw up stark questions. Like what would he have done if she had told him this from the start? Would he still have married her? If he'd had to sit down and seriously consider if he wanted a family would he have been happy to settle for an affair? And where would they be now if he'd done that?

He had a feeling they might still be exactly in this very place, and it was disconcerting. But all he could see when he looked at her was the face of treachery. Here in this place where a dream he'd never admitted to having, had just crystallised...only to be smashed to bits in the same instant.

He couldn't look at her, because looking at her was creating too much cognitive dissonance in his head.

He turned away from her.

'I'll go, Primo.'

He also couldn't look at her.

He turned around again. 'It's that simple? You just walk out of here and what...? Get on with your life?'

She bit her lip. She looked pale, eyes huge, but he couldn't let that affect him.

She said, 'Whatever you think about me, you deserve to get on with your life and have everything you want. A family.'

But that dream was now tarnished. That angered him almost more than anything else.

The fact that she'd been the one to inspire that dream only to destroy it.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

And he had a suspicion that she wasn't experiencing the same inner implosion as him. Because suddenly Primo was having all the feelings, after a lifetime of pushing them down and believing himself immune. There was anger, rage, loss, joy, hope and awe. And they were all coalescing into a swirling black mass inside him.

But all he could think of right now was the day his mother had left, when Quin had been crying and begging and pleading and Primo had been so icy-cold. Numb. Pulling Quin back. Vowing never to be someone who would humiliate himself like that.

And there was another emotion swirling in the mix that Primo wasn't ready yet to name.

He couldn't.

It was unbelievable. Impossible.

And if he uttered it everything he knew, every tenet he'd built his life upon, would dissolve and he would be left behind. This woman would walk out through the door anyway, just as his mother had done, and Primo would be undone. And this time he wouldn't be able to stay numb. So he wouldn't utter it.

He moved back. Away from Faye. Shut himself off from that swirling mass inside him. He thought of how she'd taken up a place in his life that he'd never expected—to the point that he'd taken his eye off the ball. He'd never been so lax when it came to the business, and he felt a shiver down his spine.



Had he turned into his father after all?

The whole point of marrying her had been to enhance his life and work, not eclipse it. Maybe she was right. She'd deceived him, and now she was giving him a chance to reclaim his sanity, to remember what was important to him.

Except he wasn't sure what that was any more.

He felt the terrifying urge to go on his knees before her and beg her not to go. Ice entered his veins. A self-protective force he hadn't had to use in a long time.

He said, 'You're right. We're done.'

And then he turned and walked out through the door. He was still intact. Still himself. He hadn't dissolved into the mass of seething emotions in his gut.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Manhattan, a week later

FAYE WASN'T SURE what day it was. Time had become something elastic...hard to fathom. When she'd emerged from that little house in the forest with her bag, Sadie had been waiting for her. Primo and Quin and the children had gone to some other place. Because they were family and they belonged together.

She was the outlier. Not welcome.

Somehow, Faye had kept it together.

Sadie had taken her to the airport and put her on a plane. She'd hugged her and said, 'I really hope this isn't it, Faye.'

But it was. Faye had always known, from the moment that the spark between her and Primo had got stronger, that she was playing with fire by not telling him the full truth of her past.

If only the marriage had been one of two moving parts, orbiting around each other but never really meeting...

‘Faye...?’

She looked up and saw Mark, her assistant, looking a little worried. ‘Um...someone is here to see you.’

In her little office? Hardly anyone came here. She always went out to meet people. It was a perfectly serviceable office, but it wasn’t all that interesting or sexy. It was in a building full of offices on the upper east side. Her window overlooked a tiny corner of Central Park that could just be spotted between two blocks.

‘Who is it?’

She tried to make her sluggish brain work. Was there something she’d missed in her diary?

‘It’s Primo...your husband.’

For a second Faye’s hearing and senses went. She felt as if she was under water, with everything muffled and sounding distorted. Mark was frowning, coming towards her. She waved her hands, sucked in breath. Came up for air.

She could do this. He was probably just here to discuss the divorce... But surely he could have done that through his lawyers?

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘Send him in.’

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Because, pathetically, even when she knew he must despise her, Faye wanted to just look at him. Breathe the same air.

Mark went out and a few seconds later Primo appeared, sucking all the air and light out of the room. Faye would have stood up, but her legs felt like jelly.

He was holding something wrapped in brown paper and he put it down against a wall. He was dressed in a three-piece suit. He looked... She frowned. He looked tired. A little of his golden aura slightly dimmed. She blinked. No, he was still gorgeous. She was imagining things.

She forced her legs to work and stood up. 'Primo.'

He didn't come any closer. 'Faye. You look...'

She didn't want to know that she looked tired too. She felt tired, in a bone-deep existential way that she'd never experienced before. And yet, in spite of her heartbreak, she also felt a measure of peace, after finally unburdening herself. Not that Primo would thank her for that.

'Are you here to talk about the divorce?' she asked.

'No.'

She looked at him.

'But I am here to talk.' He started to pace. 'You see, the thing is, Faye, you shocked

me in São Paulo... I had no idea what you'd been through.' He stopped and looked at her. 'That was horrific. I can't imagine what it must be like, at the very start of your young life, to be told that something as fundamental and basic as having a child is to be taken away from you.'

Faye sat down again, her legs giving way. 'It was...one of the worst days of my life.'

Primo paced again. 'And then, instead of supporting you, your husband turned his back.'

'Yes.'

He stopped. Looked at her. 'He made no attempt to understand it? To make you feel better?'

Faye stood up again. She couldn't wilt like this. She came around her desk but stayed close to it.

'No. Look, Primo, are you here to remind me of what happened as some kind of punishment? Because if you are, it's working...and, believe me, it's not as if these memories are ever that far from my mind.'

He looked at her, and his face was stark with something she couldn't interpret. It made her broken in pieces heart pulsate a little.

'No, I'm no..., I'm sorry... I just had to try and piece together what happened...'

She had to know. She could already feel the treacherous sprouting of hope. 'Why are you here?'

He looked at her, his eyes very blue. 'Because I'm not prepared to give up so easily.'

You thought that I'd fall at that hurdle? Just because your first husband did?'

Faye looked at Primo and remembered those moments when he'd joked about winning, not quitting.

'This isn't a game, Primo. You don't have to try and beat him. If it's any consolation, he really didn't turn out to be all that great. I believe he's on wife number three, and he's locked in bitter custody battles to see his children from the first two marriages.'

Primo waved a hand. 'I'm not trying to beat him—he's a fool. I'm just saying that having children can happen in so many ways.'

Faye's insides clenched painfully. This man had made her want to dream of that again, of the possibilities. Even if she would never actually give birth.

He was still talking. 'There's IVF, Faye. We could use my sperm and egg donation...find a surrogate.'

Without even thinking about it, Faye heard herself divulging, 'I harvested some of my eggs...'

'What?'

She nodded. It was as if that piece of information had always been there, but she'd pushed it down so deep because she'd never thought it would be of any use.

'After I had the operation, my ovaries were...are still intact. I was advised to freeze some eggs because I was so young. To be honest, I was so traumatised at the time that I hardly noticed the couple of months they spent stimulating and then collecting eggs. And I still have my ovaries, so even if those eggs aren't viable any more I could go through the process again.'

Primo looked shocked. ‘But do you not see that this gives us a chance to have a child of our own, Faye? How could you not have realised that?’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

‘Maybe because when it was offered up to my husband as an option he dismissed it out of hand, saying, “I’m not having some stranger give birth to a child of mine.” He had a similar opinion of adoption.’

She looked at Primo.

‘After the divorce, I shut down. I buried any hope of having a child and kept my relationships strictly superficial, so it never came up. And then, when you and I married... I just assumed it wouldn’t become an issue because we would be divorcing in six months.’

Without even realising it Faye had retreated back behind her desk, as if seeking protection.

Primo came closer...to the other side of the desk. ‘First of all, your husband was a prize idiot. And I hope I never meet him because I’ll be tempted to do him some damage. Secondly, I can understand why you behaved the way you did... But we have a chance, Faye, aren’t you willing to explore that?’

Faye could see the satisfaction on Primo’s face: problem sorted. And, yes, she could acknowledge that there might be a chance for them to have a family... But he hadn’t lived with the demise of a dream for ten years. He had lost the possibility of having a family with her for only a week. And now he was learning that there was hope.

Part of Faye was angry with Primo—totally irrationally—because he wouldn’t ever understand the pain of her grief. The devastation.



‘Primo, it’s not that simple. Just because the eggs exist, or can exist, it doesn’t mean that we can create successful embryos or even find a surrogate.’

‘There’s adoption...’

Faye shook her head. ‘Are you really willing to bring up someone else’s child? And what if nothing worked and we were still alone? Without a family? Then what?’

He came around the desk, even closer. ‘Then we’d have each other.’

Faye shook her head, terrified to let herself believe that for a second. ‘It’s not enough, Primo. We’ve been together a month. We still don’t really know each other.’

‘I know you better than I know anyone else in this world, and I know that you know me.’

‘It was intense between us—’

‘It’s still intense, Faye. It’s not going anywhere.’

She wanted to deny it, but she couldn’t. She was aware of every minute movement he made. Every inflection of his voice. The humming electricity between them.

‘Primo, I can’t do this...’

He moved even closer, and now nothing separated them. If he touched her—

Faye sat down.

Primo went down on his haunches before her.

‘Faye, what I’m trying and failing to say is that if we ended up alone then that would be okay. Because I don’t want a family without you. It’s you or no one. The dream only exists because of you, and that dream can be just the two of us, if that’s what’s meant to be.’

Faye’s eyes prickled. ‘You can’t say that for sure, Primo, because we’re not facing that wasteland. But I know. It wrecked my first marriage. And I’ve heard stories all my life about failed IVF, about adoptions that go wrong because people aren’t honest about how much they want their own DNA in their children. It tears relationships far stronger than ours to shreds. You’ve only just decided that this is something you want...and you should have it. But not with me. There’s not enough to sustain us if it doesn’t work.’

He took her hands and looked at her. ‘I love you, Faye.’

His words fell into a numb place inside Faye where she couldn’t feel them. Or believe them. She was in self-protection mode.

‘Why would you say that?’

‘Because it’s true. I fell in love with you and I didn’t even know what it was. Because I don’t think I’ve ever loved anyone before except for Quin.’

Faye stood up again, dislodging Primo’s hands, moving behind her chair. He rose in a fluid movement. Watched her. She felt panicky because what if she believed him and he was just saying this to win her over...

‘You don’t love me, Primo, it was just amazing sex. And now you think we might be able to have a family. We’re already married, and it’d be a hassle to divorce, and—’

‘Stop.’

Faye clamped her mouth shut.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Primo said, 'I do love you. And, yes, I would like us to try and create a family. Because you're the one who has broken me apart and made me want things I never thought I wanted. A whole life, Faye. Not half a life.'

But the truth was that it might only ever be half a life. Faye could see into a future where in spite of everything she and Primo couldn't create that family. She saw how their desire would wane and how empty their lives would become. How he would realise that he didn't love her. And then he would blame her for being empty, useless, like her first husband had. And he would walk away and leave her like a piece of unwanted baggage. And even though she now knew she was enough, she knew she would not survive Primo's rejection.

She was barely surviving now, but in time she might just be able to claw back some sense of herself again.

And who's that? asked a small voice. A woman skirting around the edges of life in case it hurts her?

She shook her head, hands gripping the back of her chair like claws. 'I can't, Primo. I won't.'

'Do you love me, Faye?'

Her heart beat out the answer.

Of course. Yes. For ever.

But she couldn't speak. This was the last bastion of any kind of defence.

'Don't make me say it,' she pleaded.

Because he knew. Of course he did.

He backed away to the door.

He said, 'I won't. For now. But it's there, Faye, and you can try and hide from it, or deny it, but it's futile. There are no guarantees of anything in life and, yes, I think after realising that I want to try for a family, and the kind of life I never knew, it would be disappointing if it didn't work out. But all of that is secondary to the fact that without you none of it is even worth trying for. I'm not your first husband, Faye. I'm me, Primo, and I deserve the chance to show you how much I love you. For you, alone.'

When Primo was gone, Faye deflated like a balloon. She saw the packaged item he'd brought and went over and picked it up. She took off the paper. It was the Lara Lopez painting.

Faye put it up on a shelf and looked at it. It got her right in the gut. It was all there in its messiness. Life. All the pain and heartache and agony and tumult. But also the energy and the never-ending hope that made people get up every day and believe in something outside of themselves. And finally she saw it for the first time. Love. Big and terrifying and loud and potentially heartbreaking. But it was there. Like a beating heart. Never giving up. Hoping. Striving. Failing. Getting up and trying again. Doing better. Trusting.

She loved Primo. More than anything. More than her fear that he would walk away one day because she couldn't deliver him a child.

There was a knock on the door and she turned around, heart slamming against her ribcage. Just as she was thinking it couldn't be Primo, because he wouldn't knock, her assistant appeared and handed her a note.

'Primo wrote this just before he left and told me to give it to you.'

The paper was folded over and Faye opened it.

You're braver than this.

I love you.

P (Your husband)

That evening, Primo sat at a dining table with three other men in one of Manhattan's most exclusive restaurants. And he was bored silly. How had he put up with this for so long? He wanted to loosen his tie. Throw off his jacket. Upend the table. Smash plates and glasses. Demand that everyone see and acknowledge the pain he was in. The pain of loving a woman who had been so hurt by her past that—

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he took it out.

A text.

From Faye.

Primo felt like a teenager as excitement surged in his blood.

You're right. I am brave.

Primo tipped his head back and sent thanks to every god that existed. He texted:

You're braver than anyone I know.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

I am pretty amazing.

You are.

Go ahead, take off your tie. I'm sure they won't mind.

Adrenalin filled Primo's body. She was here.

He looked to his left.

Cold.

He looked to his right.

Getting warmer.

He turned around and looked behind him and he saw her. She had her back to him, but there was a big mirror along the wall and she was watching him in the reflection.

Her hair was down. She was wearing that dress again. The one with the sequins. She was on her own, and he vowed in that moment that she would never, ever be on her own again.

He stood up from the table and said, 'Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me? There's someone infinitely more interesting and beautiful that I need to talk to.'

And he went and sat down with his wife.



Much later, in Primo's bed in his apartment, he and Faye were lying facing each other. They hadn't even managed to get from the restaurant to the car without making love.

Faye giggled a little at the memory. 'Do you think they have CCTV in that office?'

Primo grinned. 'I hope so. It'll be the scandal of the year. Primo Holt and Faye MacKenzie Bring One of Manhattan's Most Respected Institutions into Disrepute.'

'Faye MacKenzie Holt, you mean,' she corrected him.

They linked hands. Fingers entwined.

Primo said, 'Say it again, Faye. I need to hear it.'

Faye's heart squeezed. She hadn't fully acknowledged yet that, for Primo, handing himself over to someone after watching his own mother abandon him hadn't been easy.

'I love you, Primo Holt.' She pressed a kiss to his mouth. 'I love you.' She kissed his chin. 'I love you.' She kissed his forehead. 'I love you.'

'What made you realise you could do this?' he asked.

'The fact that my love for you is greater than my fear of you walking away. I'd always associated the grief I felt that I couldn't have children with my heartbreak over my husband's rejection, but I didn't love him at all. I just loved the idea of being married and having a successful life together...' She bit her lip, a faint lingering doubt niggling at her. 'What if it doesn't work and we can't have children? What happens to your legacy?'

Primo shrugged. ‘Nowadays, I don’t think succession matters like that. And we have a nephew and two nieces who, in case you hadn’t noticed, are already running rings around their parents and who bear the Holt name.’

Faye felt relief flood her. She chuckled, thinking of Sol.

Primo became serious. ‘I’m not going anywhere. Faye. Ever. No matter what happens. And I have a proposal.’

‘We’re already married.’

‘Thank God for that.’ Primo kissed her. And then he said, ‘No, a slightly different proposal. I think we should give ourselves a year. A year of getting to know one another, living together, with no talk of children, or a family, and no trying anything. How does that sound?’

‘Still trying to get me to move in with you?’ Faye joked. But she felt emotional.

It was an amazing proposal. A chance to really get to know one another before they went near the subject of children or family. She hadn’t even realised until that moment how much she needed some sort of show of trust from Primo like this.

‘Oh, you’re not going anywhere, Mrs MacKenzie Holt. Whether it’s here, or your apartment, I don’t care where we are—as long as we’re together. And never apart for longer than about...an hour? Would that do?’

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:36 am*

Faye buried her head in his shoulder, overwhelmed with love and emotion.

He tipped her chin up. 'So, what do you say?'

She smiled. 'I think that sounds just perfect... But let's add a little clause. If we want to talk about it in six months, let's talk about it then.'

Primo groaned and rolled onto his back, taking Faye with him so she lay over him. 'What is it with you and six months? Do I have to point out we only got as far as a month before the wheels came off and this marriage became a love-match?'

Faye grinned. 'Well, then, let's see where we are in a month. Because from where I'm currently lying, anything is possible.'

Primo rolled over again, and this time he was perfectly positioned between Faye's legs.

Just before he joined their bodies he kissed her and said, 'Bring it on. I can't wait.'

### EPILOGUE

AYEARTOthe day since they'd had that first drink, Primo handed Faye a large and very old key. She looked at him as the fresh breeze came straight off the Atlantic made her hair fly into her face. And then she looked at the castle. The magical, fairytale Irish castle.

'What have you done, Primo?' she asked suspiciously.

‘It’s our first anniversary. This is my gift to you.’

Faye put a hand to her mouth and let out a helpless laugh of total shock and joy. ‘You bought it?’

He nodded, delighted with himself.

She shook her head. ‘This is the most outrageous, extravagant thing... How can I ever—?’

He stopped her words with his mouth—his favourite way to interrupt her. Faye melted into the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck. For a man who had professed not to believe in romance or love, he’d become one of the most romantic men on the planet, and he told Faye on a daily basis how much he loved her. As she did him.

When they drew apart, she looked at him dreamily. ‘You’re a fool in love—you know that?’

He frowned. ‘You say that like it’s a bad thing.’

He picked her up then, and she clung on as he strode to the door and leant down to open it with the key. They went inside, where there was a fire blazing brightly in the reception hall, piles of turf beside it.

The housekeeper appeared and Primo put Faye down. ‘Kathleen has agreed to stay on,’ he said. ‘As she and her husband live nearby and have looked after the castle for years.’

Faye shook her hand. ‘Thank you, Kathleen.’

The woman smiled. ‘It’ll be good to have a family here again...it’s been too long.’

Once, that innocuous statement would have caused Faye untold pain. But now she and Primo looked at each other and shared a secret smile. In the past six months they had managed to create five embryos with Faye's eggs and Primo's sperm. And they'd just received news of a suitable surrogate. The process of transferring the embryos—they were trying two to start with—would be happening soon.

There was every reason to hope that they would get their wish of a family, but even if it didn't happen Faye knew that they would be okay. Because their lives were richer and fuller than she could ever have dreamt. Their love was strong and deep and true, and it had the roots to sustain them.

This place would hold a family again even if it wasn't theirs. Because she could already see them welcoming Quin and Sadie, who had become their closest friends as well as family.

And in the end the fairytale castle did ring out with far more than just their nephews and nieces voices. Just over nine months after that anniversary visit to the castle their wonderful, amazing surrogate gave birth to twin boys: Callum and Max.

And then, two years later, she gave birth again, to a daughter: Hope.

Because Faye and Primo had never underestimated the power of hope, while also never losing sight of what they had. Which was enough. But now they had everything. And they didn't take it for granted for one second.